JOURNEY INTO SELF: FACILITATING REFLECTION IN STUDENT TEACHERS'

Lim Tock Keng

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Tock Keng Lim
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the personal growth of student teachers in their practicum in primary schools. The practicum in the teacher training programmes of the National Institute of Education is a planned and purposeful series of supervised learning experiences aimed at equipping student teachers with beginning teaching competence, and promoting the development of their professional capacities for reflective learning and self-evaluation. During their practicum under the author's supervision, 16 student teachers answered a questionnaire on "Journey to Self" and wrote journal entries. Working on "Journey to Self" gave the student teachers an opportunity to analyze their own personal and professional growth and to understand and reflect on what they had been doing in the classroom. It allowed them to monitor and evaluate their own progress of learning and teaching. Generally, the teachers learned much about their own learning and teaching through their experiences in reflection.

Introduction

As the sole teacher-training institute in Singapore, the National Institute of Education (NIE) offers a variety of pre-service programmes: for the GCE A-level students, there is the two-year Diploma in Education (DipEd) programme and the four-year degree (BA/BSc) programme with Diploma in Education and for the graduates there is the one-year Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) course. A critical feature of all these programmes is the school-based practicum which all student teachers have to do at every academic year. This practicum enables student teachers to integrate education and practice through observing a teacher's real world of work, and to apply and refine the knowledge and skills acquired in their NIE courses (Ho, 1991).

The NIE practicum has its roots in the practicum curriculum model pioneered by Turney et. 

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al. (1982); it has retained certain key features of the parent model: the idea of practice, focused supervision, learning and development being at the centre of teacher training programmes; and a predetermined model of good classroom teaching practice, made up of competencies and personality characteristics (Sharpe, 1990).

In the practicum, student teachers are encouraged to develop effective teaching skills and strategies, the ability to plan and organise lessons, greater understanding of their pupils, a capacity for self-evaluation, and the ability to reflect and learn from their school experiences (Ho, 1991). Reflection has come to be widely recognised as a crucial element in the professional growth of a teacher (Calderhead & Gates, 1993). As shown in Bean & Zulich (1991) and Richardson and Boutwell (1993), journal writing creates a personal dialogue for student teachers in their teaching practice, encouraging them to reflect on themselves and their experiences in the schools. It offers the student teachers a comfortable means for voicing their concerns, in both the professional and social fields.

In Zeichner and Liston's (1987) concept of reflective practitioners, encouraging teachers to reflect on their experiences can help them to be better facilitators. Student teachers learn through continuous action and reflecting on what they do (Schon, 1987). Wright and Kasten (1992) also proposed an approach of student teacher supervision of practicums that included self reflection, reflecting on personal teaching, and reflecting in journals. A previous study by Chen, et. al. (1992) on the NIE practicum examined how student teachers think about teaching in the practicum and the problems they faced, with the focus being more on the lessons.

This study centres on the ability of students to develop their professional capacities for reflective learning and self-evaluation in the practicum in primary schools. It concentrates on both the personal and the professional development of student teachers; the students wrote some journal entries as well as answered an open-ended questionnaire on "Journey into Self as a Student Teacher" (Lim, 1994b). The questionnaire is adapted by the author from 'Journey to Oneself' (Betts, 1985) which she has used for structured journal writings in gifted students (Lim, 1994a).

Sample and Instruments

The sample consists of 16 students who did their teaching practicum in the primary school under the author's supervision: 6 students in the third year of their BA/BSc programme, 4 students in their first year of the DipEd programme and 6 students in their second and final year of the DipEd
programme. The student teachers were mainly teaching Primary 2, 3 and 5 pupils English and Mathematics and either Science or Social Studies; these grades of pupils were not involved in end-of-year streaming examinations (for Primary 4) or the Primary School Leaving Examination (for Primary 6).

At the end of their practicum, all the 16 students answered an open-ended structured-journalling questionnaire, "Journey to Self as a Student Teacher" (Lim, 1994b). In this questionnaire there is a section where the students wrote "Letters to Themselves," outlining their plans for positive lifestyles. In addition, the BA/BSc students wrote journal entries. The responses of the items in the questionnaire were coded and examined.

Experiences of student teachers

Generally, the students were happy with their practicum and with the guidance they received from their university supervisors and their school co-operating teachers. They benefitted from the hands-on practice that they had gotten in the schools as shown by an excerpt of the "Letters to Themselves" by a BA/BSc teacher:

The teaching practicum is really a good and effective way of letting trainee teachers develop teaching skills and experiences in the real-life situations in a classroom. It is when we get to the classrooms that we can get hands-on experience before becoming full-fledged teachers.

The final-year DipEd student teachers find the practicum particularly stressful, as the practicum fell in the final term of their programme; they had to complete the assignments for their courses within the practicum as well as sit for their final examinations after the practicum. In a particular school, the two DipEd student teachers had to go in to classes to do "relief teaching" for teachers who were absent. These relief periods could go on for a few periods at a stretch. One of them wrote this letter to herself:

It has been a very stressed and pressurized month for me as a result of the approaching assignment deadlines and a whole load of lesson planning to be done. This is the right place for me to release all my pressures cooked up for so long.

The BA/Bsc student teachers also felt the strain, though not as much as the final year DipEd students. It could be that these students were doing the practicum for the third time as they had a practicum
As I proceed through my teaching practicum, sometimes the workload can bring me down. Yes, it is only half a day, five days a week. But, lesson planning takes more than the ordinary school day. What’s more, problems of classroom management are always revolving around the teaching process. Sometimes, I wonder whether I can take the stress.

**Journey to Self as a Student Teacher**

In "Journey to Self", student teachers answered questions on perceptions of self as a teacher, classroom organisation and management, future growth and their hopes and aspirations (See Table 1). Three quarters of the student teachers perceived themselves as dedicated and warm teachers who show concern to their pupils. They would like to have open communication with their pupils. According to a DipEd final-year student teacher:

I consider myself a warm, friendly, and extremely approachable teacher. However, sometimes pupils take me for granted.

This teacher has expressed an uneasiness of many beginning teachers on how to handle the class. Thus, the other quarter of the teachers was concerned with the structure of their lessons, and how to get the interest and attention of their pupils. They also focused on the discipline of their pupils. A BA/BSc teacher wrote a journal entry on how she could motivate her pupils:

Pupils (nine-year-olds) at this age need encouragement and praises from the teacher to feel motivated. Class discipline is better maintained/managed when pupils see the purpose in learning the activities assigned. I think the best way would be through the reward system of presenting stars for each piece of good work done to create competition among pupils in the class. Group rewards also help to maintain discipline among the pupils.

The student teachers’ examination of the way they interact with their pupils would help them, according to Wright and Kasten (1992), to be more sensitive to the individual differences in their classrooms.
In their perceptions of their classroom management and organization (see Table 1), 60% of the respondents felt they need to be able to get the interest and attention of their pupils. One of the BA/BSc teachers wrote in her journal:

The warming-up activity that I used as an introduction for the lesson was interesting to the boys. It aroused their interests and sustained it to the next part of the lesson so that there is a gradual flow in the lessons.

What is good about the school’s system is that at least two periods of the English curriculum is devoted to Shared Book Reading, so that pupils’ reading interests are cultivated and sustained. Pupils always enjoy these lessons as they find them meaningful and interesting.

The student teachers also realized they had to be firm and consistent in their interactions with their pupils. They believed they learned a great deal in the practicum on how to handle the classroom and the discipline of their pupils. Discipline was also a concern brought up by the teacher trainees in Richardson and Boutwell’s (1993) study.

The other 40% of the student teachers were concerned with how to keep young pupils fully involved in activities, and the need for balance between open communication with pupils and control of pupils. This supports the point of the uneasiness of beginning teachers on classroom management (see above). As one BA/BSc teacher commented:

Management was on a day to day basis. The pupils had to be controlled, but that gradually disappears as they’re given a sense of routine over the weeks. Generally the class is well-managed.

In their practicum, students faced many challenges that they felt helped them grow (see Table 1). Except for one quarter of the students who had some personal adversities (such as the death of a loved one or ill-health), challenges of students were either weak, "difficult" students and the responsibility for being a teacher (45%) or the need to work and study at the same time (30%). According to a BA/BSc student, the following challenges helped her grow:

Having to go through numerous stages of examinations …… having to accommodate working and studying at the same time.
A DipEd first-year student wrote:

Sometimes when I am teaching I face certain difficulties like pupil attitude problems and behavioural problems ... I have learnt quite a lot about how to handle these situations and I know what to do next time.

As for the student teachers' perceptions on their future growth as full-fledged teachers (see Table 1), two-thirds of the student teachers wanted to find out how to improve on time management and group work in their class sessions. Over-active pupils also appeared to be a concern, as reflected in their perceptions of self as teachers (see above). The remaining one-third of the respondents were concerned with what had been brought up in perceptions of classroom management and organization, the point of balance between having control of the class, and having rapport with, and expressing care and concern for the pupils. It would appear that every teacher would have to develop this balance in their pupil and class management.

The last section in Table 1 focused on the hopes and aspirations of student teachers. The overwhelming majority of the student teachers (80%) aspired to be good effective dynamic teachers, whom pupils would respect as mentors. A BA/BSc teacher wrote:

I hope to be able to realize my true capacity as a teacher. I like to be one who can motivate and help my pupils develop self-confidence in their own abilities.

The other 20% of the respondents hoped to be mature persons, and to develop an awareness of their own expectations and the expectations of their pupils.

Letter to Themselves

As part of "Journey to Self", there is a section for student teachers to write a letter to themselves outlining their plans for positive lifestyles. These students wrote on a gamut of issues - on the need to be an effective teacher (35%), to have more confidence and to be a better organizer (30%), to relax and take more exercises (25%), and finally, to make the most of themselves and to consider weaknesses as challenges (10%). The topics on being an effective teacher and an organizer were in line with topics that student teachers wrote in Richardson and Boutwell's (1993) study. On the most part, the student teachers gave themselves good advice.
A final-year DipEd student wrote about being a dedicated teacher:

Funny, isn’t writing to yourself. Oh, well! Life is also like a journey, learning at each phase, improving myself as I go along. Having to work with kids, I find that they have bigger problems than me. Unfaithful father and much responsible elder son, a girl born out of wedlock .... these children have feelings, emotions and sensitivity .... Hurting their pride is just like destroying them. I will be a teacher who can guide and care for them. I will make my way to be a dedicated and a good teacher.

Two final-year DipEd students gave themselves good advice on how to overcome stress:

You have chosen a line of career which does not start at 8.00am and end at 5.00pm. Your work requires dedication and needs you to put extra time and effort for the betterment of Singapore’s upcoming generation. ...... In order to balance your life, you should take up some sports which would help you to relax after a hard day’s work.

Once all your assignments are all handed in, you can take things easy and relax. It will be better if you can start going back to your swimming and jogging when you’re are free. This would help you to revitalise yourself.

A BA/Bsc student teacher believed she should consider her weaknesses as challenges:

You shouldn’t look at your weaknesses as failures, but rather as challenges which you should strive to overcome. If you are unhappy with certain aspects of your life, being passive will not change a single thing. Gather your strength to accept things that you’ve regretted doing but can’t change, and change the things you can.

Finally, a first-year DipED student primed herself to develop a positive attitude in life:

You have to have confidence in life. .... Remember all your lessons learnt in life. Think more positively of people, so when you feel bad about a person, you will have second thoughts about feeling disgusted with her/him. Take care and keep a positive attitude in whatever you may do or encounter.
Conclusion

"Journey to Self" appeared to have helped student teachers reflect on themselves and on their work as teachers and to understand what they are doing in the classroom. As a final-year DipEd student conveyed at the beginning of her letter to herself:

Things suddenly become clear to me. I've just filled a form "Journey into Self as a Student Teacher." I've agonized over it as I did not know how to fill it. After thinking it through, I suddenly realized many things about myself. It is one thing knowing them in my heart but it is entirely different seeing them on paper.

The reflections of student teachers have allowed them to monitor and evaluate their own progress of learning and teaching. As concluded by Loughran (1994), student teachers must experience reflection as part of their own learning about teaching and learning, so that they can decide how to apply it in their own practice. In the reflecting process, it is as if student teachers have been provided with new lenses for self discovery (Wright & Kasten, 1992). As a beginning teacher, the scope of reflection is restricted to what Valli (1993) called the reflective process: how the student teacher think about classroom practices, means of managing classrooms and defining instruction. As the student teachers continue to teach, the scope of reflection should widen to take in the reflective content, what to think about the curriculum in terms of educational purposes, principles and ethics.

The study is still an evolving one. More student teachers would be added to the sample so that findings can be generalised. On the whole, the student teachers in the study learned much about their own learning and teaching through their experiences in reflection. There is a need to encourage the student teachers to develop the habit of critical reflective inquiry on their own teaching and on pupil learning, and to go beyond the process reflection of classroom practices to content reflection on the curriculum.
References


Table 1  Student Teachers’ Reflections on Self, Work, and Personal Growth.

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<th>Personal Perceptions:</th>
<th>Percentage of Responses</th>
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**Self as Teacher:**
- As a dedicated and warm teacher, patient and approachable, concerned with their pupils and with open communication. Being a mentor. 75%
- Need to learn how to handle the class, concerned with discipline of their pupils, trying to engage the attention and interest of their pupils. 25%

**Classroom Organisation and Management:**
- Learning a great deal about handling classroom and discipline of pupils. Need to be firm with pupils, get their attention and be consistent with expectations. 60%
- Need to have a balance between control of the class and open communication with the class. Problems of organizing class activities to keep young active pupils fully involved.

**Challenges that have Helped their Growth:**
- Being given weaker pupils, pupils who "stretched" their patience, "difficult" classes, having to be firm with pupils, the responsibility of being a teacher. 45%
- Studying and working at the same time, the need to work on lesson notes and assignments as well as sit for examinations. 30%
- Death of parents or loved ones, overcoming ill health. 25%

**Future Growth:**
- How to improve on classroom management, such as how to manage group work / time management in the class. How to control over-active students. 60%
- How to attain a balance between showing care and compassion and yet being able to control the class. How to build better rapport with students. 40%

**Hopes of Student Teachers:**
- To be a good, effective and dynamic teacher, well respected by colleagues and pupils, some one that students look up to as a mentor. 80%
- To be a mature person, be able to organize own thoughts and be aware of own expectations as well as the expectations of pupils. 20%