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Teachers and change: The role of reflective practice

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Abstract

1. This paper argues that the most powerful, durable and effective agents of educational change are not the policy makers, the curriculum developers or even the education authorities themselves; they are the teachers. It further contends that the quality of the educational changes that teachers have the skills and opportunities to effect will only be as reliable and proficient as the teachers’ individual capacities for reflective practice and the development of self knowledge. These aspects of teacher development have, historically, been largely overlooked in the preparation and promotion of effective teachers. The emphasis has been more explicitly focused on the development and demonstration of teachers’ understanding of content knowledge and the associated pedagogies and in their capacities to understand their students as individual constructors of knowledge in diverse social contexts. Whilst the former teacher characteristics have traditionally been valued as desirable or even mandatory indicators of teacher quality, the latter are heavily impacted upon by the individual pedagogue’s values, attitudes and notions of what it is to be a professional practitioner. In order for teachers to be effective in the Information Age, they need to recognize more than just their students’ background and learning preferences. They need to be able to take effective, positive action in the classroom context to improve the educational outcomes for their students. In order to do this they must have the willingness and cognitive capacities to recognize ethical dilemmas and examine their own perspectives on the issues they face critically and analytically. This requires regular, authentic reflection. The reflective process in which one teacher engaged as part of his role in a research study is documented.

Main Text

2.1 The rate and nature of change in modern society is unprecedented (Burchsted, 2003; Dickenson, 2000; Gardner, 2006; Houston, 2002). Teachers, in undertaking one of the basic aims of education, are
endeavoring to prepare students for a world that is constantly reinventing itself. There exists an ethical and moral commitment (Burgh, Field, & Freakley, 2005) to prepare, not just an elite few, but all students to participate in society with high levels of intellectual and academic potential and the capacity to develop the skills of lifelong learners. In order to embark on this extremely challenging task, the traditionally held notions of what it is to be an effective teacher must be transformed (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2009; Lingard, 2011; Marginson, 2008; Mockler & Sachs, 2011; O’Brien, 2002; Ramage, 2011; Shostak, 2011; Warner, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2010). In addition to the long established criteria relating to content and clientele knowledge, teachers must now be prepared to engage with the entirety of the holy trinity for teachers: know your content and how to teach it, know your students and how they learn and know yourself, your values and your capacity for reflection and ethical decision making. The latter capacity, always important (Calderhead, 1989; J. Dewey, 2005; Gore, 1987; Halliday, 1998; Kemmis, 2011; Schon, 1983, 1987, 1991; Tsangaridou & O’Sullivan, 1994; K Zeichner, 1981; K Zeichner, 1994), rises to new importance at this time for several significant reasons, including claims that many preservice teacher enter and leave their professional preparation programs with the same beliefs about teaching (Morine-Dershimer, 1989).

2.2 Teaching has recently been designated as a profession and teachers now have the same responsibilities as others engaged in professional work. They have increased levels of individual responsibility, accountability and liability. One result of this is that there now is a legal commitment to supporting scholarly success for all students, despite the cognitive complexity that is required being elevated in terms of educational expectations and societal demands (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). Additionally, teachers are impacted upon by increasing globalization and mobility in that they are mandated to accommodate the cultural, religious and societal differences that are presented in diverse classrooms (Clarence, 2011; Dyson, 2004). Whilst these are not the only concerns that teachers face, these particular professional obligations challenge teachers to reflect on how best to present content, select pedagogical strategies, understand student differences and the accompanying parental and community demands and expectations, redefine what it is to be a teacher in the modern world and even to reconsider their notions of basic constructs such as the nature of intelligence. While teacher standards, government policies and proclamations, curriculum boards and national requirements are developed and teachers are expected to use these as guidelines in their everyday professional practice, the reality remains that teacher practice in the closed environment of their own classrooms relies almost totally on the individual’s capacity to interpret, understand and perform the role of a teacher as mandated by these documents, whilst simultaneously making spontaneous decisions and attending to the inevitable classroom interactions that cannot be planned for. Documents of change do not automatically empower teachers and, to add to the complexity, individuals bring unique understandings, personal values and varying degrees of competencies to their acknowledgement of, and dedication to, these documents in practice. This situation compels teachers to describe, to analyze and evaluate and to use the resulting insights to improve practice; in other words, to develop skills in reflective practice. Whilst the notion of practitioner reflectivity is not new, it is argued that teachers in contemporary classrooms now need to undertake their reflections from an increasingly informed personal understanding (Akerson, Abd-El-Khalick, & Lederman, 2000; Boud, 2001, 1993; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985).

2.3 The purpose of all the various types of reflection in professional contexts appears to two be fold; to engender change in order to improve the practice (Calderhead, 1989; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kemmis, 2011; Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001; Scanlan & Chernomas, 1997; Schon, 1991; Schuck, Gordon, & Buchanan, 2008; Wildman & Niles, 1987) and to develop further self knowledge and understanding (Abell, Bryan, & Anderson, 1998; Akbari, 2007; Boud, et al., 1985; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). However, as
reflection is, of necessity, a metacognitive undertaking and as such is an intensely personal pursuit, especially when undertaken to improve professional practice. Even the act of describing an incident or occurrence which triggers (Boud, et al., 1985; Calderhead, 1989; Hill, 2002; Kemmis, 2011; Schon, 1991) the reflective cycle itself relies for its accuracy on personal interpretation and perhaps is not as rational, scientific and able to be ‘objectified’ as Dewey (1933) initially suggests. Despite the individual characteristics of various models of reflective practice, the initial event is described and then universally analyzed and evaluated against specific, appropriate criteria. In each of these cognitive processes, there is the considerable impact of the individual’s personal attributes, including their previous experiences, values and ethical perspectives. In the final stage of reflection, some decisions are made related to change, adaptation or moderation of professional practice with a deliberate focus on professional improvement. It is because of the uniqueness that each person brings to their reflective activity, and to the interpretation of the meaning of the experience being recalled or enacted, that accurate intrapersonal intelligence becomes so vital. It is therefore suggested that teachers need to purposely develop, examine, re-examine and check both their self-knowledge and their capacity to use this knowledge in order to improve their professional practice, utilizing the notion of the intrapersonal intelligence domain introduced by Gardner (1993) as one aspect of his Multiple Intelligence Theory. This theory not only brings together and meaningfully links the purposes of reflective practice, but facilitates personally meaningful ways of planning to improve practice by utilizing relative strengths.

2.4 The notion of intrapersonal intelligence as foundation for reflection has been explored extensively by Lazear (1999a; 1999) who identifies intrapersonal intelligence as the ‘introspective intelligence’ (1999a p.111) and explores a number of mindfulness exercises aimed at improving self awareness and promoting effective reflection. Gardner (1993) presents the dual nature of intrapersonal intelligence as (i) self-knowledge and (ii) executive function (Moran & Gardner, 2007). Self-knowledge in this case is how an individual understands themselves both as teacher and learner. It allows individuals to acknowledge various self expressions such as ‘I need, I want, this is a good way for me’. It also facilitates an understanding of the ways in which others may know an individual and how these may differ from an individual’s own knowledge of himself or herself. This knowledge of self representations can be expressed as ‘I know myself in ways that others may not know me, I know that others may perceive me differently to the ways in which I know myself’. Both aspects of this self knowledge are created, maintained and challenged by personal insights and socially mediated perceptions and feedback. The second aspect of intrapersonal intelligence and the least explored is executive function. Self understanding in this aspect focuses around what Moran and Gardner (2007) name as the ‘Hill, the Will and the Skill’. It is this aspect of intrapersonal intelligence that has the capacity, once developed, to impact most profoundly on an individual’s reflective practice, most specifically on the final stage of the reflective cycle, the plan for improvement, although it does influence the quality of reflection in the stages of the cycle.

2.5 The Hill refers to the plan of action or the goals that are set for improving teaching and the skills that are embedded in this decision making process: the capacity to identify personally relevant strategies and procedures, to make decisions based on personal needs and desires and to plan actions when faced with difficult or unfamiliar situations. The Will, as expected, is related to how motivated an individual is to initiate and implement their plans. The Skill refers to the self monitoring aspects of implementation, namely; an aptitude for flexible thinking and the effective use of the working memory, the capacity to monitor and change behaviours in order to achieve goals and to monitor inappropriate responses, the discipline and interest to sustain attention and concentrate on goal appropriate activities and the compulsion to persevere when faced with goal-related difficulties. Working with this theory of self knowledge, teachers have the opportunities to develop accurate knowledge of self and to recognise more
readily their personal relative strengths and limitations. Engaging in the skills associated with the ‘Hill, the Will, and the Skill’ not only facilitates strengths based planning for professional improvement, but provides a framework for authentic, lasting, professional change. An example of one beginning teacher who found himself in such a situation is detailed below. Despite this teacher openly welcoming the proposed changes in which he was to be involved with his class, difficulties were encountered. It was by engaging in a reflective process in which he considered not only how best to teach the curriculum content or how best motivate his students by identifying and planning for their individual learning preferences but also what he knew about himself.

3.1 In response to the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2008), school systems in Australia were required to make provision, in all their teaching related official documentation, for the education of every child in each classroom, irrespective of the variants that constitute student difference. One school’s response to the requirement that teachers differentiate their teaching, content and tasks to provide an inclusive, productive learning environment was to invite the implementation of a research project which was designed to support the development of the cognitive skills of executive function as defined by Moran and Gardner (Moran & Gardner, 2007). The research design introduced a differentiated program of work for 10 -12 year old students to be implemented in the combined time allocated to Social Studies and English. Three teachers agreed to participate in the study. Each was responsible for one class of combined year 5 and year 6 students. These classes were collectively known as stage three classes. The implementation of the differentiated programs of work was the responsibility of each of the teachers. The design was developed using a Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000) identified hereafter as RBT and Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993) identified hereafter as MI matrix. This framework afforded multiple tasks at different levels of cognitive complexity across different content domains. Research evidence (Noble, 2004) was available to indicate that this planning framework had the potential to be implemented in multitudinous ways to suit individual teacher’s pedagogical preferences and to support increased student academic outcomes.

3.2 The research required students to indicate any awareness they may already have relating to their personal MI strengths and relative limitations. Each student participant was then required to select tasks for completion from the eighty tasks provided across the matrix. They were instructed to select tasks that they would personally consider in each of the following categories: Easy, Consolidating and Challenging. The teachers’ roles were to mentor the students in the event that they were unsure of what to choose at the each of the three levels and to facilitate new learning in the knowledge, skills concepts and strategies that students may require to complete the selected tasks successfully. To ensure this was achievable, each of the three differentiated programs of work that were implemented over the six month duration of the study were developed from specific sections of the K-6 English and K-6 HISE document and so common foci were able to be identified for the supporting skills programs. Although suggested organizational procedures were available, the three participating teachers found the implementation and management of this program very challenging. Each of the three teachers had, as expected, executed the implementation in the context of their classrooms and class cohorts quite differently, despite the specific design and the preparation time that had been devoted to developing common understandings. This, however, had little impact on the overall results of the study. What did impact, not so much on the study itself, but on the manner in which the overall findings influenced the teachers and the direction in which the school intended to implement its differentiation plans, was the capacity of one teacher to critically reflect on the challenges that implementing the differentiated program of work had presented and to take appropriate action based on his desire to improve his practice. The remaining two teacher participants, while acknowledging the challenges, either sought help from the researcher who was an experienced teacher of this age of student, or minimized the length of time spent engaging with the differentiated programs.
3.3 The critically reflective teacher found the implementation of the differentiated program highly problematic. During the initial four weeks he struggled to meet the needs of his students in several areas. He found that resourcing and managing the students and their works in progress was time consuming and exhausting. He knew that he wanted to make differences to his practice for a number of reasons related to improving students’ learning experiences in his classroom but felt totally overwhelmed by the sheer physical effort that the differentiated program demanded. This may be because, unlike the other two teacher participants who were quite happy to implement the differentiated program, this teacher began to ‘own’ the research study and placed a high degree of importance on providing the best possible mentoring for his student participants. By the end of the first month, he reported that the study was ‘consuming’ him as he struggled to remain organized and effective in other curriculum areas. He felt overwhelmed at the prospect of participating in the project for the remainder of the time. In discussions with the researcher he found it difficult to identify precisely the areas in which he might be supported. It was at that point that he realized that he needed time for formal reflection. He needed to ‘get back to basics’. He questioned why he had wanted to be a teacher and spent time critically analyzing why the implementation of the differentiated program was making such a strong impact on him and yet was not fulfilling him as a teacher. In fact he acknowledged the impact was quite the opposite: he was finding that implementing the differentiated program of work was increasingly frustrating. During the reflective process here- examined the initial motivation that had determined his career choice. He was then able to articulate the reasons behind his decision to engage with, and to take ownership of the study in which he was a participant. He had wanted to make a difference to students’ learning in school. He had wanted students to be enthused about new learning and to explore their learning potential. In his reflections he indicated a strong commitment to schools and to education in general as mediators of social change and transformation. He also deeply cared about the quality of the students’ school experiences and the opportunities he could provide for them to have authentic task choices, make personal learning decisions and learn in the context of a collaborative community, without losing sight of his accountability in assessment. He was sensitive to the difficulties that these ideals created in a formal learning environment and acknowledged that institutional demands, systemic demands, community expectations and managing diverse student needs had drawn him to be socialized into a teaching and learning context that did not always encourage him to fully explore ways in which this could be achieved within these existing constraints. As a relatively new teacher he had four years of experience from which to reflect and learn, but he felt that his critical analysis and evaluation of his professional practice to date did not provide him with the solutions he needed.

3.4 However, when it was suggested that reflecting on his self knowledge, that is his intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1993), may help him find an appropriate and practical way forward, the situation began to change. Instead of focusing explicitly on the teaching standards(New South Wales Institute of Teachers, 2005), the school policies and curriculum documents, he began to consider his own personal values and expectation and to acknowledge his individual relative strengths and limitations. As he identified in his recollections of the factors that motivated him to be a teacher, he was committed to ethical professional practice and to the wellbeing of his students. What he needed to consider were the implications of his understandings and perspectives, his preferred ways of working professionally what priorities he held to be important in all his endeavors and how to use this self knowledge to achieve his goals; in this case those that were important to him when working in the teaching and learning environment with his students. He realized that, as an enthusiast of extreme sports, he was particularly methodical and well organized. The framework within which the implementation of the study had been developed was too open ended for him to be professionally comfortable. It was then he began to use his
skills and strategies to meticulously work through areas of the implementation and to identify strategies that could be introduced incrementally and which would gradually restore his sense of ‘balance’ in his professional life whilst maintaining the integrity of the research project.

3.5 The students continued to self select their tasks from the considerable number provided, but, in order to improve his assessment opportunities and maintain a record of the tasks that the students were undertaking and the learning that had been achieved, he instigated two simple procedures. Instead of the tasks being available to students as color-coded laminated task cards, they were made available on colored paper with the corresponding syllabus outcomes and indicators on the back. As the intervention required the students to share their work with their peers as they completed their challenge tasks, he drew up a timetable, which indicated the days and times that could be made available for sharing learning. This was readily available in the classroom and the students ‘booked’ themselves in for their presentations as they neared the completion of their challenge tasks. The presentations were comparatively formal and the teacher was able to check the degree of competency that the student presenters had achieved during the actual sharing time as assessment information was available on the task sheets the students handed to him prior to the commencement of the children sharing their products. These records of achievement, suggestions for further progress and general comments were then shared with each student before becoming part of the assessment records. The simplicity of the whole procedure made a remarkable difference to ways in which the teacher perceived his participation. The students were very willing participants. The teacher made his laptop available to the students and many presented their products accompanied by a power point presentation. The routines motivated the students to prepare well for their presentations to the class and this resulted in greater attention to the quality of their work, their presentation skills and their capacities, in turn, to be an appreciative, respectful audience. The end of the research project was not the end of differentiated practice for this teacher. By the end of the six month research period, he had planned a similar differentiated program for himself. He designed extra record keeping charts to start off the new class that he would welcome the following year into his classroom and had organized the other teachers to work on the first program with him and then to participate in the development of differentiated programs of work across stage three. They worked as a team, selecting tasks using based on each of their individual relative strengths. Documenting what happened the following year and the degree of change that was sustained was beyond the scope of the study, but would have been of interest.

5.1 The teaching profession is, like any population, comprised of individuals. Each has unique experiences that have, in turn, been interpreted in time and context in their particular manner. Each also has personally constructed understandings of what it is to be professional, to be a teacher and to be reflective. An individual’s capacity to be totally objective may be a hotly contended topic in philosophical debates (Burgh, et al., 2005) but it is generally accepted that it is almost impossible. The implications for reflection on professional practice are obvious: individuals describe, analyze and plan a way to improve in their own ways. This writing has presented an argument for the implementation of Gardner’s (1993; Moran & Gardner, 2007) notion of intrapersonal intelligence as a supportive framework for authentic teacher reflection as it requires authentic personal response, facilitates planning to improve using strengths based strategies that allow for individual approaches to the changes needed to improve professional practice. This approach fosters ongoing, genuine enrichment of individual personal practice irrespective of the level of initial engagement. This is simply because it permits teachers to start from their own individual experiences and perspectives; consider these in their contextual variations and draw upon the theoretical, professional strategies that they have encountered or plan to explore. It validates the time and efforts spent on reflection as it allows the planning of actions to improve to draw on all three
aspects of the holy trinity for teachers; pedagogical and content knowledge, students and community preferences and differences and an understanding of self and the personal potential that each has to improve their professional practice and to initiate and sustain change.

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