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Learning and sharing through reflective practice in teacher education in Italy

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Abstract

John Dewey (1933) argued that learning from experience is enriched by reflecting on experience and Donald A. Schön (1987) theorized that reflective practice represents an important factor to improve professional activity. Jack Mezirow, (1991, 2000) gives reflection a central role in learning because through it we become aware of the ways in which we interpret reality and give meaning to actions and behaviour. From this theoretical framework this paper describes a case study about the benefits produced by reflective practice on students during teacher training in Italy, with a particular focus on the connection between reflection, self-awareness and learning. In particular it analyses the experience of reflective practice of thirty-five pre-service teachers’ education, with a qualitative approach, “Clinica della Formazione” of Riccardo Massa (1987, 1990). Based on these results we would like to prepare a model of reflective practice for pre-service teachers and teachers in service.

Keywords: reflective practice; teacher education; learning; professional development.

1. Introduction

In these years the European Union has focused its attention on education as a key factor to achieve the Lisbon goals on development, growth and social cohesion. To realize this intent it is necessary to promote the quality of teaching and teachers of quality. So it is very important to prepare teachers with an education model that develops pedagogical and psychological skills and supports them to operate properly in a perspective of lifelong learning and the reflective practice can be a good instrument to achieve this aims. Indeed it is a process that involves professional personal and social life. Research on reflective practice over the past two decades has shown that it gives educators a lot benefits, in particular it helps their professional development (Holbor, 1988, Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, Postholm, 2008b). Starting from this idea, this paper describes a case study about the benefits produced by reflective practice on thirty-five students in pre-service teachers’ education in Italy, with a particular focus on:

- the connection between reflection and learning;
- the connection between reflection and teachers’ performance;
- the connection between reflection and self-awareness.
2. Theoretical Frame

Dewey (1933) argued, learning from experience is enriched by reflecting on experience. So reflection engages students in thoughtful recollection that leads to heightened understanding of learning and relevant transfer of learning and skills. Schön (1983, 1987) theorized that reflective practice represents the important factor to improve professional activity. Active reflection on such experiences is also seen as an important means of resolving conflicts between theory and practice. Reflection is also viewed by many as the foundation for developing the highest professional competence in the complex practice of teaching. The findings of these studies support the notion that pre-service teachers have the ability to develop a better understanding of the skills and knowledge and self-awareness through reflection. Mezirow, (1991, 2000) gives reflection a central role in learning because through it we become aware of the ways in which we interpret reality and give meaning to actions and behaviour, transforming the way we conceive of our being in the world. Reflection helps students to understand experience in the present but also in the future with other experiences. This is very important because reflection became a tool to make sense in the different life experiences.

3. Aim

The aim of this survey was to show how it is important to improve reflective practice in pre-service teachers’ education to develop their self-awareness and professional skills.

4. Context

5. The focus of this research was on a reflective practice workshop in pre-service teachers education course. The reflective practice workshop took place at the University of Milan- Bicocca during Spring 2008, under the guidance of a supervisor and its purpose was to allow students to acquire at the beginning theoretical knowledge and gradually enter into relationship with the school situation and the role of teacher. The reflective practice workshop in pre-service teacher education course accompanied students’ internship in schools. So the practical activity in schools is accompanied by an activity of reflection on doing. Students built skills and ability through the internship, reflection practice and interaction with other students and the supervisor.

5. Methods

A qualitative analysis was conducted on thirty-five students during a course of pre-service teachers’ education. In particular the methodology used was derived by “Clinica della Formazione” of Riccardo Massa (1987, 1990, 1992). “Clinica della formazione” is a method of action-research to improve educators’ professional skills and performances. It promotes a reflective and transformative practice (Mezirow, 2000). “Clinica della formazione” establishes a space-time of suspension or bracketing of (teaching) in order to think about it. This creates a "middle place" that interrupts the flow between what is done, is known and what is thought. In this way a virtuous hermeneutic and empirical circle is established between the narrated, categorized and interpreted. The empirical dimension interacts with the theoretical and it opens a new operational dimension. In particular this methodology investigates in a concrete and empirical way a specific professional context and in a specific job practice and uses two operations one a reflective practice and one that transforms their profession. “Clinica della formazione” is at the same time a research methodology and learning experience where it is necessary to re-think and to understand, in a circle of self-reflection.

The empirical dimension interacts with the theoretical and it opens in a new or renewed operational dimension. This methodology starts from the description of an episode (oral or writing or drawing) of educational practice and tries to understand the models that guide the actions. It explores the episode with particular focus on:
- the procedures and the instruments used in educational practice activity;
- the context of educational practice activity: organization; links between theoretical knowledge and practical and professional activity;
- the emotions felt during the educational practice activity. (Table 1).

| “Clinica della formazione” methodology |
|---------------------------------------|
| Study on reflection practice workshop through the analysis of students’ narrative/writing descriptions with particular focus on: |
| 1. the connection between reflection and learning |
| 2. the connection between reflection and teachers’ performance |
| 3. the connection between reflection and self-awareness |

Table 1. Clinica della formazione methodology

6. Results and discussion

The analysis was on thirty five student’s essays about the utility of reflective practice workshop during their internship in school with the “Clinica della formazione” methodology. So it explored 3 aspects in students’ essays: 1- the connection between reflection and learning from experience (Dewey, 1933) through the description of what they learnt about teaching activity during reflective practice workshop; 2- the connection between reflection and teachers’ performance (Schön, 1983, 1987) through the description of how they changed their teaching activity in class during and after reflective practice workshop; 3- the connection between reflection and self-awareness (Mezirow 1991, 2000) through the description of their emotions, interactions, relationships with other students and the supervisor.

1. The connection between reflection and learning from experience

During the workshop students gained the possibility of focusing on their experiences in class and on learning strategies and methods to improve their activities. Students asked question about their teacher practice and they learned to plan their teaching activity. The supervisor encouraged students to use reflection to connect their experience with their learning. In particular students said:

- "Reflective practice guided me in teaching activity and it helped me to develop my ability in teacher profession “
- “Reflective practice workshop supported me”.
- "The workshop helped me to learn new methodologies of teaching”
- "It was very significant. It allowed me to discover and learn new techniques and instruments to be used in my future profession.”
- “I learnt the importance to plan and to built my teacher activity with attention. I learnt methodologies and practical and theoretical knowledge”

2. The connection between reflection and teachers’ performance

Schön (1983) described reflection in and on action as an important tool for professional learning. In this specific case a lot of students explained that reflective practice workshop was a very good instrument that accompanies the internship. In particular students said:

- "Reflective practice is a tool for the training of teachers which puts them in a position to reflect on their future profession.”
- "Reflective practice is the tool that is used to analyse our future profession as teacher and understand our role and our skills.”
- “It helped me to build my teaching in class. In particular it gave me the possibility to learn how to articulate the arguments in modules and units and scan time”.
- “My experience was very positive because I was able to implement in class methods learned during the reflective practice workshop.”

3. The connection between reflection and self-awareness

Reflective practice helped students to improve their teaching activity and their preparation. Students described the importance to reflect with colleagues on their experience in class. Indeed they were involved in research activity and through the relationship with the other students tried to give real meaning about what concerns their training experience. In this way they developed their critical thinking. Reflective practice is a tool through which they learn to look at things in depth. Students also developed modes of inquiry, and shared their diverse ways of knowing and experiencing. In particular students said:
- “I learned how to interact with everyone from teachers to students.”
- “It gave me the opportunity for discussion, reflection and self-analysis” and “it was a place of reflection and discussion on the role of the teacher and the relationship with the students.”
- “My experience has been positive, it has allowed me to overcome some of my personal limitations”

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research in teacher reflection and the outcomes give us some suggestions to promote the reflective practice as a methodology to develop professional abilities. In particular in this case it demonstrated that there is a real connection between: reflection and learning from experience; reflection and teachers’ performance; reflection and self-awareness. Students improve their knowledge, skills and their critical thinking to analyse their activities and different situations. (Figure 1)

| ANALYSIS on REFLECTION PRACTICE WORKSHOP | RESULTS |
|------------------------------------------|---------|
| The connection between reflection and learning from experience | 1. Students improve theoretical and professional knowledge |
| The connection between reflection and teachers’ performance | 2. Students improve critical thinking to analyse the different situations |
| The connection between reflection and self-awareness | 3. Students improve their performance in class |
|                                           | 4. Students learnt to solve problems |
|                                           | 5. Students learnt to work in team |
|                                           | 6. Students develop relationships with colleagues |

Figure 1. Results’ research

In conclusion the reflective practice workshop is a great learning tool in teacher education. It allows them to learn methods, techniques and how to teach the subject. Furthermore students wanted to reflect together to learn and this
collective reflections enriched their experience in class and their learning. Reflective practice permitted students to discover, articulate, and act on what they learn from their experience in class. In particular, they learnt that reflection is a part of the planning process of their teaching in the present and future activities in class. It is an important educational opportunity that cannot be missed in the preparation of teachers and has to be enhanced. Therefore, reflective practice requires research and experimentation to be improved in the curricula and “Clinica della formazione” can be a good research method and also a good strategy to reflect on experience, because it helps students to analyse their skills and their ideas to improve their professional development. Based on data analysed, we suggest the importance of reflective practice in teacher education and the necessity to improve this also for in-service teachers.

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