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Now what? First year student teachers' reflective journal writing

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing focus for New Zealand teachers on reflective practice, initial teacher educators must take increasing responsibility in scaffolding students' critical writing, developing reflection skills for working in schools, the teacher registration process and ongoing professional learning. This article reports a study of journal writing practices of a sample of student teachers in their first year of an undergraduate degree at the University of Waikato. Of particular interest in the findings are the sophistication of the students' writing, choice of topic for each entry and the impact of feedback and support provided.

KEYWORDS

Reflective practice, initial teacher education, journal writing, writing sophistication, feedback

Introduction

Reflection has been defined in many ways but it is fundamentally about making meaning “an engagement of the mind that transforms the mind” (Costa, 2001, p. xiii). It is the process of assessing and comparing existing practice and knowledge in order to predict, speculate and answer questions. While reflection may mean loosely different things to contemporary educators (Ghaye & Ghaye, 2001), several writers regard reflection in education as an essential tool for linking practice and theory and for comprehending the significance of tacit knowledge through the asking of stimulating questions (Cattley, 2004; Joseph & White, 2006; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). Reflection leads to the analysis and possible replacing and reframing of assumptions, thinking and practice (Down, 2006; Peters & Le Cornu, 2006), critical in teaching in the twenty-first century.

The focus on using reflection as a learning tool in education has grown out of the work of many researchers but in particular the work of Dewey (1930s) and Schön



(1980s). Their work has been applied to a range of contexts and recent teacher education studies continue to explore the impact of reflective practice (Cattley, 2005; Hume, 2009b; Raeburn, 2006; Seban, 2009). In theorising about teachers as reflective practitioners, researchers have identified open-mindedness, wholeheartedness and a sense of responsibility as key attributes for successful educational reflection (Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999; Le Cornu, 2009). These attributes are essential for teachers in New Zealand where the devolution of responsibility for professional learning has moved from centralised authorities to self-managing schools. This increased focus on self as inquirer has resulted in greater importance being placed on preparing initial teacher education students to become reflective practitioners (Ussher, 2001).

With greater focus on developing and improving teacher knowledge and practices, reflection strategies are more important (Cattley 2005). There is limited learning without reflection (Joseph & White, 2006; Schön, 1983) so there needs to be time and approaches for reflection as a framing condition for ongoing professional learning (Ussher, 2001; White, 2009). Interactive opportunities enable teachers to write and talk about observations, thinking, reading and practice, as greater learning value occurs when teachers interrogate events particularly through dialogue (Ghaye & Ghaye, 2001; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002). To effectively interrogate events and practices over time and with others, it is essential to have a written record of both the actual event and own thinking. Journal writing is an appropriate approach to achieve this goal.

In reviewing the literature, the process of journal writing is shown as onerous, tiresome and time-consuming for many student teachers, particularly for those with little experience and skill in journal writing (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002). For journal writing to be more effective, this perception must be addressed. Researchers report that most journal entries are descriptive in nature, written as reports or reviews (Hume, 2009a; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002) because the students do not have the skills to be effective journal writers. Developing reflection skills can be complex and problematic (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002), an acquired skill requiring scaffolding by experienced teachers (Hume, 2007; Harford & MacRuair, 2008). It is clear that explicit instruction is needed to promote high levels of reflection (Seban, 2009), for example, through workshops and conferencing (Hume, 2009a; Russell, 2005). This is best achieved when an appropriate framework is provided for the writer (Cattley, 2005; Hume, 2009a; Seban, 2009), but it also varies according to prior experiences and confidence. Workshops are shown to account for variations in the sophistication of a student's journal writing (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002). Levels of sophistication in students' journal entries reported by Bain and colleagues (1999) varied "from simple description in which little if any reflection is evident, to highly sophisticated self-dialogue in which several perspectives are explored" (p. 52). Bain et al. (1999, p. 60) drew on a range of research to develop five levels of sophistication to analyse their data: level 1 writing reported the event (describing, re-telling), level 2 writing responded to the event (observing, judging), level 3 writing related the event (connecting) to previous observations and experiences, level 4 writing reasoned the event (exploring, analysing), and level 5 writing reconstructed the event (generalising, internalising). To fully engage as a reflective practitioner, student teachers must learn to write at levels 4 and 5. This will demonstrate a depth of thinking and lead to improved engagement with colleagues and mentors.

Recent researchers have also found that effective student reflections cover a wide range of topics, but are typically focused around three main elements. First, *emotions*: including self-awareness, reactions to events, problems faced and emotional release (Cattley, 2005; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002). Second, *general teaching issues*: including content and pedagogical knowledge development, schooling and educational aspects such as leadership and parents (Cattley, 2005; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002; Seban, 2009). Third, *learning teaching*: including self-ability, teacher image and identity, survival, the profession and ideas for improvement (Cattley, 2005; Seban, 2009). All three elements are important in a teacher's development and cannot be addressed separately. Student teachers need to be encouraged to write across the range of topics.

Students' reflective writing is enhanced by feedback, and targeted comments from experienced teachers encourages further writing and exploration of topics (Bain et al., 1999; Raeburn, 2006). Irrespective of the target of feedback, reflective journal responses benefit from interactions with significant others where further questions are posed, connections are made, perspectives are explored and generalisations are sought as part of ongoing dialogue (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002; Seban, 2009; White, 2009). Teachers who reflect alone generally are not reported as being able to challenge their own practice to the extent required for real change to occur (Timperley & Robinson, 2001). These researchers found that reflections supported by colleagues and other professionals are more inclined to produce learning of value, including challenge of and change to existing practice and beliefs.

The student teachers in this study were required to keep a reflective journal as part of their school-based placement. All students in the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) are placed for at least one morning a week throughout their first two semesters. This placement exposes them to the rigours and realities of classroom and school life and provides opportunities to complete practical teaching tasks designed as part of their course work. Their reflective journal was first introduced as a means of recording their thoughts and attendance. It then developed into a tool for recording, communicating and reflecting on their classroom experiences with the associate teacher and course lecturers, in particular their "Professional Practice and Inquiry 1" lecturer.

Based on the literature and the writers' knowledge of the students' journal writing, it was decided that a sample of journals should be investigated to learn of the success and value of the reflective journals introduced in this programme. With greater emphasis on teacher reflection and the likely introduction of student teacher e-portfolios as evidence of achievements through their initial teacher education programme, the writers wanted to investigate the sophistication of the students' writing, the most common elements addressed through the choice of topics, and any obvious benefits of feedback they were receiving, if at all. The main research question was: Of what value is the reflective journal for these first year student teachers' learning and practice?

What occurred in this study?

This interpretive study explored the reflective journal writing of a sample of 50 first year student teachers. From 2004 to 2009 a sample of about 200 students' reflective journals was collected from students who volunteered their journals. During this period of time approximately 1500 students would have completed journals. All students gave their journals with informed consent as required by the University of Waikato Research

Ethics committee. From the sample of 200 a manageable sample of 50 was purposively chosen, representing about a quarter of the collected sample. This sample was chosen to provide a range of programme occurrences, year of completion, varying quantity of writing, and ensuring some journals contained written feedback from other teachers. The data mined were trustworthy in that they were taken directly from the original reflective journals written and submitted by students. The students and their associate teachers mostly recorded their journal entries longhand (written) and both researchers crosschecked the data.

The student teachers who wrote the reflective journals collected for this study had all completed the first semester of their three-year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) at the Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato. They were from two different programme occurrences where supervision and interactions varied. They were either in the campus-based programme (HAM) or the distance programme (MMP). The HAM students used their journals to reflect on observations and practice completed during a weekly morning placement at a local primary school. During their placement the HAM students were typically one of three to five students in class with one classroom teacher and required at various times to complete assigned teaching or observation tasks for their courses. Being one of many student teachers in a busy classroom had implications for access to feedback from the classroom teacher. In many situations the journal entries were completed alone and left in the care of the teacher without immediate or any comment. Some schools, however, did organise their students to meet at the end of each morning placement to discuss and reflect on their experiences together. There were also infrequent opportunities for university lecturers who had observed teaching sessions to engage with the students and their journal entries. Placements were different for those students in the MMP programme. Typically they were placed on their own with one teacher in a school at a distance from the university campus. These students were placed for one school day per week. This created more opportunities for the classroom teacher to engage in discussion and provide feedback especially during breaks, although it also meant university lecturers had limited opportunities to engage.

During the period of this study, no direct instruction on writing a reflective journal was provided to the students. The assumption was made that students would complete entries on their own based on the framework provided. A further assumption was that the students' own teaching practice, coursework tasks and discussions with the school-based placement teachers would provide ideas for entries. It was expected that students would set aside a short period of time before leaving each placement session to record an entry. In writing the reflective entries in their journal, the following framework was provided for the student. They were to address the following three sections adapted from the *Project Adventure* debrief strategy (Rohnke, 1989).

- *What?* In this section they were asked to list an episode, event or incident recalled from the placement. Written examples and directions were provided.
- *So what?* In this section they were asked to justify why they included this episode, event or incident. Again examples were provided.
- *Now what?* In this section they were to analyse and evaluate the episode, event or incident. They were asked to consider the implications for their practice as a teacher. Examples were provided.

It was expected that up to 12 handwritten half-page entries would be presented in each journal at the conclusion of the semester, although it was expected there would be

variations in length and quantity. The data were analysed first by scanning the sample journals to identify broad themes. These themes were supported in the literature as highlighted in the introduction. Using these broad themes, the data was re-read frequently for greater thematic classification of the entries. The themes identified included sophistication of the writing, choice of topic, impact of feedback and utilisation of the layout. No further data were gathered from the writers of the sampled journals through interviews or surveys.

So what did this investigation find?

This paper discusses findings from the reflective journals. The data were explored to determine the value of the journal as it was used at the time and whether further modifications would enhance the value of the task. Anecdotal evidence suggested that many student teachers and classroom teachers found value in the journal writing. Journals that included feedback on student entries were included in the sample as these provided an opportunity to investigate whether students who received constructive instruction and/or feedback from their teachers experienced greater learning value from their journals. This learning value was based on the criteria of “ongoing dialogue relating to one topic”. Analysis and interpretation of the data for this article followed the following themes:

- Sophistication of writing style: narrative reporting versus critical reflection;
- Dominant elements of the topics of reflection in the journal entries; and
- Support for students’ writing through feedback.

Sophistication of writing style: Narrative writing versus critical reflection

The majority of journal entries simply reported particular episodes that occurred. The least sophisticated entries were short recounts, mainly describing an event or observation. Students writing these generalised descriptions often “forgot” to write in their journals. They were a minority. Some entries were almost entirely narrative, level 1 of Bain et al.’s (2001) sophistication. Here is an example of an entirely narrative journal entry: “Today I taught my last literacy lesson. It was great. We blew bubbles and then made a book about our experiences. All the children had a favourite experience and enjoyed making the book”. This entry lacked response, connection, perspective and critique.

In the questionnaire nearly two-thirds of students stated they always wrote in their journal within 12 hours of the episode and confirmed they had enough time to complete a journal entry each week. Apparently, reflective writing did not come easy for many of these students and they lacked the knowledge needed to make the journal writing a learning experience. It is acknowledged that the students in this sample were not given explicit instruction or practice in reflective journal writing. These journals were generally in the lower levels (1 and 2) of sophistication but some valuable outcomes were achieved for the students in terms of recording important learning episodes. Another less sophisticated and entirely narrative entry read:

The children organised themselves in groups before they went over to get their injections. The children sat in groups of friends and talked about the injection. One group of girls came into the classroom singing

“injection, injection” and seeing what reactions they would get from others. Two children who don’t usually play together were talking and comforting each other. S pulled up O’s top and looked at the cream on her arm and told her it wouldn’t hurt.

Perhaps a good recount with some response but this entry shows no evidence of critically reflective thinking about any aspect of the events. With further time spent in study and placement experiences, this student’s entries became more sophisticated with comments becoming more responsive and connected: “If more children read books from an early age it would be extremely beneficial to them and the teachers. It will improve their vocabulary, language skills and reading ability”. This student did not simply give a recount of events but began to relate to other experiences she recalled. The entry still lacked sophisticated dialogue and critical reflection. In a later entry this student reflected on an episode with more sophistication, Bain et al.’s (2001) level 4, reasoning: “I need to be aware that even though a student may be a little slower in completing some work, they may be deep in thought and in their own time contribute more than their peers in regards to value”. Although some of the less sophisticated journals slowly became more critically reflective, including perspective, the majority of journal entries dominated by a narrative writing style remained this way throughout. There were also instances in which a more sophisticated entry would randomly appear in a journal. On some occasions it would appear that something extremely interesting or unexpected would happen that really interested the students, therefore making them naturally more enthusiastic and engaged with the particular entry. This created an opportunity for them to relate the event to past experiences (level 3) and reason their thinking about the event (level 4).

A common theme suggests that reflections generally began with a recount, as instructed, but then only began to analyse and evaluate the episode in the final sentence or sentences of the entry. An example of a more sophisticated entry that began to show critical reflection through response and reasoning in the final part of the entry follows:

The students were working on their “personal recounts” and the teacher left the room to go to the office leaving me in charge for 2–3 minutes. The students instantly started talking to each other and jumping up from their tables. They asked me if they could have a party and started clowning around. I had difficulty quietening them down and getting them to focus on their work again. My efforts to control them were unsuccessful and the teacher returned to a disruptive class. I found this event un-nerving.

This student could have expanded and reflected more critically on the situation, seeking deeper understanding by generalising the concepts, giving further implications and showing an internalisation of the issues by commenting on how practice or beliefs may change.

Some journals were critically reflective throughout and showed high levels of sophistication in journal writing. An example of one of the more sophisticated journal entries is as follows:

In my first three days as a “real” teacher I have struggled with making the transition from teacher aide to teacher. I know all the children in this class and have worked with some of them over the past two years to

support their learning in one-on-one, small group situations. I'm not sure now if my previous methods/strategies have been best practice, as some of these children seem to think I am here to provide them with all the answers! Getting the balance right as to how much teaching/assistance to give the students before and during activities/tasks is hopefully something that I will learn with experience. Another aspect I am struggling with is teacher expectations of students. Again I wonder if this is due to my experiences working with children with special needs where every accomplishment/achievement, no matter how miniscule, is a cause for celebration.

This student questioned, connected and challenged her current beliefs and gave possible reasons behind her thinking and behaviour. This journal stood out because it was consistently critically reflective and entries were mostly at levels 3 and 4. It definitely included the highest levels of sophistication of the 50 journals sampled.

Topics of reflection in the journal entries

The tone of the majority of journals was positive and optimistic. That is not to say that nothing negative was written. Some journals focused on sad, frustrating and negative episodes. However, generally students were able to reflect positively on less positive situations, avoiding pessimistic outlooks. There were many more narrative entries focused on general teaching than episodes involving the emotions of teaching. The journals appeared to be honest and seemed to provide a safe place for students to release tension and record emotions experienced. The honesty of the journals came through after an unsuccessful teaching experience, giving the reader a strong sense of the student's frustration. Many students were honest about episodes that they observed that they did not agree with even if it concerned their placement teacher, who was then required to read and sign the entry. For example, one student wrote, "I have noticed that students dislike it when their teacher continues to ask the same children to do the 'special' jobs. It can cause unrest and jealousy among students. We have to learn to be fair and consistent". This student obviously felt comfortable enough to voice his true opinions in the journal. Some of the more sophisticated entries read more like a personal dialogue, asking and raising questions throughout, continuously reflecting on questions raised earlier. These reflections were not discrete and self-contained but continuously interwove between entries.

Although the topics of reflection varied in these journals, particular topics appeared frequently. In all years the choice of topic was open. The table below shows the frequency, percentage and main element of the topics written about.

Table 2. Content, frequency and elements of the main topics of journal entries

Topic of Reflection	Frequency	Percent	Main element
Teaching experiences	122	21	Learning Teaching
Observing children	85	15	General Teaching
Behaviour management	74	13	General Teaching
Observing experienced teachers	63	11	General Teaching
Interacting with children	60	10	Learning Teaching
Special school events	36	6	General Teaching
Interacting with parents	16	3	Learning Teaching
Other insights, experiences and episodes	125	21	Emotions
Total	581	100.0	

The topic most commonly written about focused on students' actual teaching practice opportunities. More than one in five of the reflections were based on these *learning teaching* experiences. These descriptions of lessons often commented on strengths and weaknesses of their own teaching. Some of these reflections highlighted areas for improvement and future goals. Although teaching experiences were the most common topic of reflection, the complexity of entries varied widely. One example is this less sophisticated, descriptive journal entry on a personal teaching experience: "The language experience lesson was really good as the students got into the listening and talking and doing. They all did what was expected of them and the teacher was happy with my lesson". On the other hand, the following entry showed a higher level of sophistication, with greater attention to interrogating the issues of planning and student behaviour, mostly focusing on *learning teaching* while also including comments on the *emotion* element as well:

I am commenting on this episode because it had a significant effect on me and how I felt at completion. It provoked a number of emotional responses for me. I had taken a great deal of time and effort to efficiently plan my lesson of cooperation and well thought through the concepts and learning intentions. The lesson started well, although I was surprised at the difficulty students seemed to be having in grasping the simplest of concepts. Soon the lesson seemed to unravel a little at the edges. Behavioural management was needed and there were so many "mini issues" needing to be dealt with simultaneously. I felt somewhat overwhelmed and lacked experience and confidence to pull things back together. I was disappointed in how few of the class met the learning intention and felt this reflected badly on my teaching ability.

About 15 percent of the entries were about observations of children. The majority of these entries were recorded following a specific lesson observation for the students and

focused on the actions and behaviours of children. For example, one student wrote early in the year, “Today when I arrived at my base school I noticed a new student hanging around our classroom. I introduced myself and he told me” Typically these entries were level 1 recounts of children’s behaviour during class time, especially near the beginning of the placement period when the students were not fully involved in the classroom curriculum. Examples of this topic included when the classroom teacher was working with a group and the student was able to observe the remainder of the class working. For example, “It is important because of the way the teacher develops the atmosphere, the children quiet, focussed on their work”. A more sophisticated entry about the school triathlon suggested, “The fact the children were bored and frustrated as well as the parents being present, made it a challenging and trying event. It showed me the lack of control that can occur” A further example analysed a group of students pretending to be a gymnastics team and how this impacted on the way the student thinks “about how children learn”. Some entries were quite specific and sophisticated, for example, this short extract from a long entry: “I was shocked, pleased and impressed when I arrived at school on Wednesday to find a cooperative and behaved young student come into the classroom quietly and sit at the front of the class. No fuss!” This entry was one of several where this student teacher observed a child over an extended period of time, noting growth and behaviour. These entries were typically focused on *general teaching* issues and did not involve direct interactions with the child.

Of the 581 entries analysed, about 13 percent focused on behaviour management. These *general teaching* reflections were often based on a teaching practice experience that did not go as planned due to child behaviour management issues. Students often gave reasons as to why their behaviour management was weak and indicated what could have been done better. Episodes of student misbehaviour and conflict also fell under this heading and were commonly reflected on, for example, children off task, not following instructions or directions or leaving class without permission. Other entries focused on the behaviour management techniques of the classroom teachers. One student commented on the way a teacher handled misbehaviour:

One student was off task and infringing on others by being intimidating and annoying. The way the teacher handled it was in a very clear-cut, no-nonsense manner—take one of two choices, go to place A or be escorted to place B. It was the nature in which the message was delivered; “the meaning business” was the sense of being serious without getting caught in the emotional drama displayed by the student.

Interestingly the topic of behaviour management was more common in the journals written by male students. One particular student focused five out of his seven completed entries on behaviour management. His five entries were titled “A part-time teacher gets angry at a student”, “Behaviour management fails”, “How teacher manages high-needs student’s behaviour during class”, “Watching how teacher controls and teaches her maths class” and “Learning disrupted by bad behaviour”. While this inflated focus on behaviour was exceptional, the majority of the entries in those journals written by males were reporting on behaviour management episodes.

Slightly more than one in ten entries reflected on observational experiences of experienced teachers. These *general teaching* reflections indicated that students appreciated being given the opportunity to observe experienced teachers. Many reflective comments appeared following a specific observational experience as indicated in the entry. Students often described the effective strategies and techniques

that the experienced teacher used and explained how they intended to use these ideas in their future practice. Several reflections critiqued the experienced teacher's performance and gave suggestions as to how they believed things could have been done more effectively. For example, one student who includes both *emotional* and *learning teaching* elements wrote:

Some of the techniques she used I would not necessarily use. Just in my opinion some were too blunt. Example: when she is talking she would single out shy students who may not be focusing, say their name and ask, "What do you think (child's name)?" I guess her class is used to it.

Another example of a student questioning practice based on an observational experience was, "My question is, is having a loud voice okay?" This student went on to explain that as a teacher's aide she was always told to speak quietly. However, she now observes a teacher speaking extremely loudly. The student then began to discuss instances where a loud voice was not appropriate: "However, there will be children who come from backgrounds where raised voices may cause them fear or be regarded as culturally inappropriate. In such instances I would definitely need to be aware of the volume of my voice". This student reflected thoughtfully on her observational experience and ended her journal entry with the *learning teaching* goal of "looking into this further".

About 10 percent of the reflective entries focused on interactions with children. Reflections under this heading were usually based around one-to-one teaching and learning experiences or interesting conversations with one child or more. One student felt a sense of achievement after working one-on-one with a child with special needs. His entry is mostly descriptive about *general teaching* issues although he also includes the *emotion* element:

This week I helped a dyslexic boy in my classroom with his maths [needs]. The boy needed lots of one-on-one help. We talked about the maths and finally he learnt what place value was. Me and the student both gained a great sense of achievement. I could see it in his eyes. I think this was great for the student as he will now hopefully be more confident when working alone. I think I have developed a professional yet supportive relationship with the child.

The less frequent journal entries focused on special school events (around 6 percent) and interaction with parents (nearly 3 percent). Special school event entries appeared as *general teaching* reflection topics and mostly centered on special guests attending school, staff meetings and assemblies. However, the most frequently reflected on special school event was school camp. Reflections based on interaction with parents usually occurred after observing episodes between classroom teachers and parents for these first year students. For example, one *general teaching* comment highlighted the pressure that parents put on the classroom teacher every morning. The student teacher responded to the event with a level 5 generalising comment that although it is a teacher's responsibility to develop positive relationships with caregivers, "they do not have the time to talk about the weather all morning".

More than one in five of the journal entries were focused on "other" personally significant insights, experiences and episodes. The elements of these topics varied greatly but mostly included *emotion* and *learning teaching* elements. As examples of

some entries, the focus was on emotional issues out of school, conflict with classroom teachers, personal milestones and achievements. Interestingly, the two students who provided some of the more sophisticated, critically reflective journal entries seldom chose to write about the *learning teaching* topics that were most common. They usually reflected on quite unique experiences and episodes. These students wrote about what interested, excited and challenged them. For example, their entries focused on equity, inequitable practices, relationships and transitions. While not a trend overall, the entry topics of these outlier students tended to fall in the “other” box.

Support for students’ writing through feedback

Classroom teacher feedback did appear in some of the student journals. However, the majority of journals contained no feedback. It was expected that the classroom teacher would sign and date each entry to attest to their having sighted the entry but this also was not evident in the entire sample. Less than a quarter of the sampled journals contained some written feedback. Some of the feedback was brief and only consisted of one or two words of encouragement (e.g., “Good point”), while other written feedback comments were almost 100 words.

Teachers’ feedback was generally not directed at encouraging higher levels of critical reflection. For example, one classroom teacher commented, “You really noticed a lot of my management techniques and fantastic to see you critically reflecting so well Sara!” Unfortunately, the journal entry that the teacher was commenting on showed very little, if any, critical reflection and was simply a recount of events. However, this type of feedback was beneficial in that it was encouraging and indicated to the student that their entry had been read. Classroom teacher feedback often consisted of and was focused on areas such as giving praise on a teaching performance, giving helpful suggestions and advice to improve teaching skills, and providing students with an explanation as to why something may have occurred the way that it did.

Some classroom teacher feedback did encourage students to critically reflect on a situation and go further than simply recount events. The classroom teachers often did this through questioning. Here is an example of a classroom teacher asking a student to further consider a situation. The classroom teacher asked, “So do you think short bursts of thinking/activity and using ‘proximity’ worked with the children? How could you use this in your interaction with the children?” This was valuable feedback as the student had simply recalled events in her reflection rather than critically evaluating or analysing the situation. The teacher’s feedback encouraged this student to reflect further. Other examples of teachers further probing students’ thinking included, “Okay, so you have explained the situation, now do you think it could have been handled differently? What would you have done?” and, “So how would this observation have implications for your teaching? You could follow up the last bullet point with an idea of what you think could be done and why”. Comments from others benefited the students, encouraging them to reflect on a situation more deeply, to engage further with the teacher. Ongoing written dialogue was noted in these journals. However, on only a few occasions did the teacher’s feedback get a written response from the student. In one example the classroom teacher commented, “So what do you think were the implications for the learner? If you considered that he is ‘least disciplined’ with ‘poor management’, why do you think he ‘got it’?” The student responded:

The implication for the child could revolve around the fact that the lesson or interaction was in a small group. This enabled a better, more focused learning session. The child had less distractions and was working closely with me. He probably “got it” because, the normally evident distraction of a whole class were not so evident and the content was more targeted.

Praise and encouragement were the types of feedback that appeared most frequently in the journals. Classroom teachers often commended a student on their successful teaching experiences or gave positive support and encouragement when a student’s journal entry reflected a sense of failure. An example of positive encouragement followed a student’s entry describing an unsuccessful health lesson. The teacher’s feedback supported the student and gave justification as to why it was not the student’s deficiency: “Very likely not your planning at fault. The reliever informed me that the children were extremely off task all day. Children are always more unsettled with relievers present”. This student found this feedback comment extremely valuable as she commented about the praise and opportunity to talk with her teacher about the teaching episode, giving her the reassurance she needed. Other examples of praise and feedback that appeared to build the confidence of the student included, “A fabulous lesson”, “sounds great”, “relief teacher informed me that this was a great lesson”, “great observation” and, “you read your book like a professional!” This feedback appeared valuable in many ways.

Now what?

From these findings several issues are apparent in determining the value of reflective journal writing for student teachers in initial teacher education. Reflection is challenging for student teachers in their first semester of study but research clearly shows effective reflection on teaching practice is an important influence (Cattley, 2005; Ussher, 2001). While the selection of relevant events or episodes as topics for reflection varied a great deal, this study indicated that students are generally capable of selecting appropriate episodes as entries. The three critical findings from this research are that students must be presented with a suitable framework for their writing, they must receive instruction in reflective writing and they must receive encouragement and feedback from a professional colleague.

Suitable framework

While there are a variety of frameworks available to guide students’ thinking and writing, the one used in this journal (Here’s what, So what? Now what?) was shown to be effective as a structure to guide and record reflection. While the headings may not totally stand alone, the description and prompt-questions for each heading provided full and supportive directions for the students. This was also an easily remembered format for the students and teachers, although maybe by using the word “what”, there was a tendency to write about more specific general teaching issues rather than emotions or learning teaching aspects as identified in research (Cattley, 2005; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002; Seban, 2009). This point is borne out in the topics of reflection with the greatest emphasis being on teaching experiences and observations.

Writing sophistication

A more critical issue, as indicated by earlier writers, is providing all students with instruction to develop their writing sophistication. This investigation revealed only a small number of sophisticated entries included in the sample. It is accepted that there will be varying sophistication within each entry and within a journal; nevertheless it is important to move the writers from the narrative recounts that dominated these journals to a deeper reflection including reasoning, generalising and theorising practice and beliefs. Mostly the students began their entries with level 1 narratives. From that point it was not obvious that they possessed the necessary quality of open-mindedness (Le Cornu, 2009) to explore further or the desire to make meaning from the event (Costa, 2001) by analysing or generalising the concepts. To achieve this, students must interrogate the deeper pedagogical and professional issues that may impact their practice and beliefs about teaching. They must debate the issues of “arguments” and theorise how they might manage or change this to allow for positive learning in a similar situation. To be able to identify key concepts and then analyse, a student should be scaffolded into reflective writing (Hume, 2007; Seban, 2009). Successful instruction at the start and throughout the reflective journal writing process would go some way to help develop depth and critique in their writing, move the writers from level 1 through to levels 3, 4 and 5 (Bain et al., 1999).

Value of support and feedback

The final critical finding in this investigation is the value of support and encouragement for students’ reflective writing. Researchers show clearly that feedback on students’ thinking is critical to their learning (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002; Seban, 2009; Ussher, 2001; White, 2009). The classroom teacher in these student placements was in the best position to provide support and feedback. There may be some implications in the classroom teacher providing feedback, such as the neutralising of the student’s entries to avoid any potential criticism or conflict. Certainly, the best possible course of action would be to have the student and the classroom teacher sit together to discuss each entry and its implication (Ussher, 2011). This may also be of benefit to the teacher as an opportunity to further explore own practice. However, in the already busy life of the school-based classroom teacher who firstly has obligations to the children in the class and school, the reality of this dialogue occurring would be a challenge. If a student is to be encouraged to write widely and reflectively, including more of the *emotions* and *learning teaching* dimensions (Cattley, 2005; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002; Seban, 2009), then her/his reflective entries should receive written feedback from an involved professional colleague. Each journal entry should be recorded, giving the teacher time to respond. The classroom teacher’s response could then be utilised, valued and supported by the student teacher and ITE personnel.

Conclusions

For reflective journals to be of greatest value to student teachers and their school-based placement teachers, the writing of entries must be supported. The support should come from three sources. First, the support should come from initial teacher educators in the form of instruction on how to write effectively. This study shows that the majority of ITE students need instruction in reflective practice and sophisticated journal writing

early in their study programme. Lecturers need to take responsibility for developing the curriculum of such sessions by providing practice opportunities and exemplars that demonstrate the differences between narrative and self-dialogue writing, including taking alternative perspectives. This instruction should include choice of events, maximising the format provided, depth and sophistication of reflection, opportunities for dialogue and response to feedback. Instruction should start early and continue throughout the journal writing period to support students' developing ability to relate, reason and reconstruct events chosen for reflection.

A second source of support should be peers. Students who are able to share their reflective entries with colleagues in the same cohort will have a common topic of discussion, which may create opportunities to compare and discuss entries, utilisation of the framework, levels of sophistication in their own writing and responses to chosen events. This may require the ITE providers to facilitate time and create scheduling spaces for these opportunities to occur.

Third, the provision of feedback from the school-based classroom teacher should provide ongoing and close support for the student teacher. To be effective in providing feedback, classroom teachers must acknowledge the value of journal writing, understand the framework being utilised, know the levels of writing sophistication required and strategies to develop a writer's ability, and know suitable approaches to implement an effective reflective journal writing process for students in their classrooms. As shown in the findings of this study, the acceptance and ability of the classroom teacher to support reflective journal writing requires involvement from the ITE provider. Communicating this information and up-skilling the classroom teacher where necessary should be integral to reflective journal writing.

The findings in this study warrant further investigation into the professional learning outcomes for student teachers when appropriate support is provided before and during the school-based placement period. Importantly, any links between feedback from professional colleagues and improved reflection writing would be valuable. It appears that this duty of support belongs initially to the ITE staff members responsible for the implementation and maintenance of the journals but for it to be of greatest value, the support role may need to be continued by significant others including school-based placement teachers, other course lecturers and student colleagues.

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