Writing Reflectively in Initial Teacher Education: Laying Foundations for Career-long Professional Learning

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Abstract
Reflective practice is a hallmark of many teacher education programmes and a means of moving students from novice to competent status. Reflection can support practical understanding of the out-workings of theory but can also contribute towards the development of the individual teacher's professional identity. To help support beginning teachers through the often complex and difficult transition from student to practitioner, this study aimed to explore the benefits and challenges faced by beginning teachers in learning to become insightful thinkers and reflective writers. An interpretative, qualitative approach, utilising focus groups, individual semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis in the form of reflective portfolios was employed. Results showed that it was only when students began to think strategically and to systematically document their personal discoveries about teaching, that they were able to appreciate the power of reflective writing as a meaningful endeavour. Collaborating with university tutors and host teachers also helped deepen their understanding of the complicated and nuanced nature of pursuing their unique learning pathways. Going forward, more explicit conversations around meaning and purpose, additional modelling and guided practice around the process of reflective writing are suggested.

Keywords
Reflection; student teacher; professional learning; identity.

Introduction
Reflection, and the promotion of reflective practice, have generally become accepted as integral aspects of most teacher education programmes in the UK and internationally (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Orland-Barrack and Craig, 2015). For those learning to teach, reflection can be a tool to help them engage in a process of anticipatory socialisation (Moeller, 2024) through which they can gain a better understanding of the work of teachers and begin to 'think like a teacher' (Kleinfeld, 1992, p.124). This can support a close examination of their actions and the context within which those actions take place, in order to forge improvement in future actions (Moate, 2023). Not only is reflection seen as a tool to support improved practice, but is also seen to be instrumental in an ontological process of 'becoming' a teacher by enabling change in understanding and perspectives on practice (Akkerman and Meyer, 2011).

Within the teacher education programme concerned, reflection is conceived as thinking, talking and writing about professional experiences either individually or collectively with peers or mentors, underpinned by a research orientation and conducted within an ethical and value-based framework. This definition is in line with the thinking of Dewey (1933), Schön (1983; 1987) and Valli (1992) amongst others. The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges faced by a participant sample of first year students engaged on a four-year programme of initial teacher education, along with the potential benefits to professional learning that could be gained by developing reflective orientations and capacity.

Literature review
The reflective approach to professional practice has its origins in the work of Dewey (1897; 1900;

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1916; 1933; 1938). In '*How We Think'* (1933, p.9), Dewey introduced the notions of encountering uncertainty and engaging in problem-solving as dimensions of reflective practice which had relevance to the processes of teaching and learning.

Dewey's ideas were developed by Schön (1983; 1987; 1991) whose concepts of 'knowing-in-action' (ibid, 1983, p.49), 'reflection-on-action' (ibid, p.278) and 'reflection-in-action' (ibid, p.56) are useful in establishing the relationship between the tacit knowledge possessed by teachers (knowing in action), retrospective reflection on events passed (reflection-on-action) and existing situations in which teachers need to make immediate decisions (reflection-in-action). Schön takes the view that reflection-in-action enables practitioners to deal with the unexpected situations which emerge in practice and provides for a problem-solving orientation in which the practitioner becomes the researcher within the context of their practice. Reflection-on-action is the individual's ability to reflect on actions after the event in order to review, analyse and evaluate practice and develop their professional repertoire in the future.

As points of criticism of Schön's model, (2008) Finlay (2008) has outlined some of these, based on ethical, (the emotional impact of engaging in reflection for novice practitioners), professional (the extent to which it can allow for purely subjective opinion, pedagogic (related to readiness and ability to reflect appropriately) and conceptual concerns (different perspectives on the meaning and definition of reflective practice). Others have focused on its practicality, relevance, and overall value, particularly in relation to its definition (Rodgers, 2002), terminology (Rodgers, 2001) and purpose (Valli, 1992). Further issues relate to difficulties in teaching reflection and developing reflective capacity (Jay and Johnston, 2002), the need for time and a suitable knowledge base to reflect appropriately (Cook and Leckey, 1999) as well as the potential to change existing preconceptions about teachers and teaching (Hatton and Smith, 1995).

As well as the issues outlined above, there is considerable debate as to the extent to which reflective practice should be scaffolded for students. Guo, (2021) supports reflective scaffolding and Welch and James, (2007) provide a clear theoretical framework to promote reflective activity which has proven useful to students and teacher educators alike. There is the danger however, that a scaffolded approach can lead to a mechanistic and uncritical type of 'reflection on demand' (Boud and Walker, 1998, p.3) whilst at the same time, little or no direction can prevent students achieving a focus for their development.

With these perspectives in mind, the precarious nature of reflective practice, in the context of teacher education, is well summed up by Jay and Johnson (2002, p.876) who state that:

> Reflection is...comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one's thoughts into dialogue with oneself and with others. One evaluates insights gained from that process with reference to: (1) additional perspectives, (2) one's own values, experiences and beliefs, and (3) the larger context within which the questions are raised. Through reflection, one reaches newfound clarity, on which one bases changes in action or disposition. New questions naturally arise, and the process spirals onward.

Despite these difficulties, the development of reflective orientations is widely believed to benefit the development of teachers' professional practice and identity development (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Orland-Barrack and Craig, 2015).

In terms of developing reflective thinking and writing, reflective portfolios are perhaps the most common method employed in the field of teacher education (Smits et al., 2005; Oner and Adadan, 2011; Feder and Cramer, 2023). Antonek, McCormick and Donato (1997) suggest that reflective

portfolios can be powerful tools to document and track teacher growth; promote reflective practice; and assist in the process of teacher identity development. They suggest that if teacher development cannot be understood without knowledge of the thought processes of the teacher, the reflective portfolio can be the tool through which not only the individual teacher's behaviour (their professional actions) is documented, but also their thought processes (reflections) upon those actions.

They go on to suggest that three key dimensions of Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky, 1978) are particularly useful for understanding reflective portfolios: mediation; history; and consciousness. Mediation is the tool (in this case the portfolio) which links the mental processes of the individual to the real-world context (the classroom, the university etc.) and vice versa and as such, 'mediates change from thinking as a student to thinking as a teacher' (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011, p.17). In Vygotskian terms, the concept of history relates to the circumstances, contexts and histories which are peculiar to the individual and which impact upon their understanding and development. The student teacher's reflective portfolio is therefore unique and as such lends itself to an interpretative approach to examination. Finally, consciousness is reflective activity on action and reality and therefore has resonances with the work of Schön (1983) outlined earlier.

With these perspectives in mind, the specific research questions this study aimed to address were as follows.

1. How are the newest recruits to teacher education able to negotiate the demands of developing reflective capacity, specifically through their initiation into reflective writing?
2. To what extent does developing their reflective capacity benefit their professional learning?

Methodology

Given the nature of the topic, the study adopts a constructivist or relativist ontological position, emphasising the subjective nature of reality and suggesting that individuals learn from, and respond in different ways to given phenomena, dependent upon a range of personal, social and contextual influences. From this, a qualitative, interpretative research design, (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) was employed, the purpose of which is to understand these meanings and world-constructions through asking open-ended questions, seeking views and perspectives, examining contexts and eventually deducing meaning (Grey, 2014).

Sample

The sample was a specialist group, purposive sample (Newby, 2010) of student teachers in their first year of study on a teacher education programme in Northern Ireland. The sample was chosen as it was only they who would have the 'rich understanding' and the 'insights that only the members [of the specialist group] can provide' (Newby, 2010, p.251). The rationale for wanting to investigate students in their first year of study was based on the premise that it would be likely that, from their personal experience as pupils in school, they would have preconceived notions of the nature of teachers and teaching which would be likely to be challenged significantly during the course of their first year of professional preparation (LaBoskey, 1993).

Following ethical approval by the institutional ethics committee, expressions of interest were sought by providing the complete cohort of students (*n*=95) who had entered the programme in September of the year in which the data collection took place, an overview of the intended research and what it would involve. It was made clear that the impetus for this project was to help improve future course provision and therefore the student experience of moving from secondary to university-level writing where the demands differ considerably. Students were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that it would have no impact, either positive or negative on their overall academic outcomes for the year. Drawing on the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Guidelines

(BERA, 2024) and those of the European University Institute (2022), the researchers assured the participants that their data would be stored securely in the Cloud and would only be accessible by both researchers via their password encrypted computer accounts. Such data would be destroyed upon completion of the project. This initial contact laid the foundation for receiving participants' informed consent (Mustajoki and Mustajoki, 2017) since it introduced the researchers and the general remit of the proposed project.

In order to secure any undecided but potentially interested participants, one of the research team not directly involved with teaching, visited each cohort sub-group to answer any queries and to clarify points of confusion. Students were requested to submit their willingness to take part by return of email. Upon receipt of responses, the self-selected sample were then sent electronic copies of more fulsome information containing the project aims and overall research questions along with an outline of participant obligations. In line with ethical research practice, participants were also informed that since their participation was voluntary, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of penalty or having to give a reason for their withdrawal (BERA, 2024). They were also informed that their contributions would be anonymous and that in any reporting of the data collected, they would be given pseudonyms. The final sample consisted of 10 students: three males and seven females, all of whom had started the programme directly from their secondary education.

Methods

Three qualitative research instruments were employed, with each, specifically selected to provide a window into the lived realities of the participants, in terms of their understanding and ability to write reflectively about the professional learning experiences gained both from their academic courses and school-based practice. They were:

- pre-school block placement focus groups (semester one)
- individual post-school block placement semi-structured interviews (semester two)
- reflective journals (year-long)

Focus groups

The initial data collection took place in the university during the first semester. Two focus groups were conducted with five participants in each and dealt with issues related to the students' understanding and application of reflective writing from prior experience, support and the process of learning to write reflectively, and lessons learned from having engaged in reflective writing.

Individual semi-structured interviews

Six participants agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews which were held after the block of school placement in the second semester. The purpose of the interviews was to allow participants to share their developing understanding of reflective writing as an outcome of their placement experience and as a means to develop their professional knowledge and understanding. The questions asked related to the extent to which the participants felt their reflective writing abilities had improved or otherwise and whether or not they had sought advice on completing their reflective portfolios, and the extent to which they found this helpful.

Reflective portfolios

Reflective portfolios formed a key component of the data collection as each participant was required to develop a portfolio during the course of the academic year in the same way as all other students on the programme. The students were introduced to the concept of reflective practice from a theoretical perspective and this was then contexualised to actual practice in school. Guidance was provided to each student at the outset of the programme, outlining the structure and requirements of the portfolio:

- structured reflections - to be maintained during the course of the academic year and following a framework of description of experience; the affective dimension; analysis; and finally, action determined as a result of the experience (Welch and James, 2007);
- reflections on the written feedback each participant was given by their visiting tutors during school placement;
- the reports written by the host schools following placement.

As such, the data from the reflective portfolios provided a set of detailed stories or narratives about each participant, told either by themselves or by others (Sfard and Prusak, 2005).

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the range of data sources outlined above allowed for triangulation and provided a fuller overall picture of each participant's development during the course of the academic year in which the study took place. Whilst acknowledging the contextual uniqueness of the study, Bassey (2001) suggests that qualitative studies such as this may resonate with others involved in similar situations, through the application of 'fuzzy generalisations' (p.5). By triangulating data, researchers can increase confidence in the broader applicability of the findings and therefore strengthen the relevance of fuzzy generalizations. Both triangulation and 'fuzzy generalisations' (ibid), recognise that even though absolute certainty may be unattainable, insights from qualitative data can still offer valuable contributions to knowledge.

Data analysis

Considering the qualitative nature of the data generated, thematic coding was used as an appropriate form of analysis (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). This was achieved using the six-step guide to interview analysis as advised by Radnor (2002). The first stage identified broad topics which emerged from the first round of interviews. This was followed by the creation of categories within each topic which emerged from close reading of the transcripts. Thirdly, topic codes were added to each chunk of transcript and once each transcript was coded, coding summary sheets for each topic were constructed. Finally, it was then possible to collate the data within each topic and category into what Radnor (ibid) describes as a coded transcript. Each of the reflective journals were subjected to the same analytical rigour, thus allowing for a synthesis of all the data sets. Finally, the coded and summarised data were related to the specific research questions.

Ethics

The main ethical difficulties related to the research team also having different roles in the teacher education programme. This had the potential to give rise to issues of coercion, institutional power, damage to relationships, confidentiality and informed consent. In addition, was the issue of 'reflexivity' (Somekh and Lewin, 2009) whereby we were aware that our positions could have been intimidating to the participants who in turn, may have provided us with data which was not necessarily truly reflective of their actual views and perspectives. Similarly, it was important to recognise our own subjectivity throughout the research process so that we did not merely seek what we wanted or expected to find. To help address these issues, we ensured that at each stage of the data collection, we adhered closely to the BERA guidance (BERA, 2024) and also to the ERSC framework for research ethics (ESRC, 2022) in terms of avoiding harm, ensuring consent, respecting privacy and avoiding deception (Gray, 2014).

Findings and analysis

The findings are presented in line with the specific research questions, i.e. the challenges faced by the participants as they began to develop their capacity for reflective writing and thinking reflectively, followed by the professional learning benefits gained from building reflection into the different

aspects of their professional learning.

Challenges to developing and sustaining reflective writing

Understanding the purpose of reflection and learning to write reflectively was not without its challenges. The first problem seemed to be knowing what to write. In the focus group, Lily observed, 'I was kind of nervous about writing because I didn't really know what to say'. Poppy reflected a similar uncertainty, 'I kind of felt that I wasn't sure if it's the right sort of thing'. This lack of confidence was sometimes a result of not grasping the larger purpose, as demonstrated by Florian who said:

> We had to sit and record facts about the [school] building and reflect on it. Like, how can you reflect on the building?

Allied to not knowing what to write, was the problem of how to write, in what for many was an entirely new genre. The concept of genre implies generalised ideas about the content of the writing that lies within a distinct and absolute set of formal conventions. Some of these formal conventions were easier to internalise than others e.g. the use of the personal pronoun, 'I'. In her focus group, Daisy stated:

> I didn't think that you could use like, the personal pronoun. It turns out when you're doing reflective writing it becomes necessary because it can become very awkward if you don't use it.

Here, Daisy highlights an assumption that all academic writing is essentially the same and in essence, closely aligned to that which was prevalent within their secondary education experiences. It is likely that they were accustomed to writing what others (authorities in their field) had to say, whilst expressing their personal opinions in a more passive voice. Therefore, it is understandable that some degree of hesitancy would arise when one's own experiences and views are called upon within the context of academic commentary. That said, once participants began to understand and accept that there were different formal conventions, this allowed for the provision of necessary scaffolding which helped develop their familiarity with the genre. Subsequently, when they began to acquire insights into the nature and purposes of the writing, they rapidly began to develop their own strategies about how to approach it and what to include in it. When Poppy was interviewed, she stated, 'Once you had the handwritten notes, you felt pretty satisfied and then you rewrote things in more detail'.

Iris too, in her interview said that she employed a similar technique, while 'weeding out stuff that wasn't about the children'. Still, another strategy was to begin recording observable details:

> like the number of people in the classroom and then try to tie all this together as much as possible and talk about how things worked
>
> (Interview with Basil).

Such a remark indicates an inkling of understanding about the purpose of reflective writing, which is to transform novices into thoughtful, informed, and impactful practitioners.

Some participants questioned the reality of being able to meaningfully incorporate reflection into one's professional armoury on an on-going basis. The practicality of doing reflective writing along with the pressing daily demands of teaching was an issue:

> You want to be able to integrate your reflections into your lesson plans, but it's very hard to reflect on yourself because you are quickly on to the next lesson
>
> (Interview with Florian).

Rose described the difficulties she faced as the year progressed. In her interview, she noted how in the first term, she valued her reflective writing, but in the second, it was a different story when classroom teaching took precedence.

> I liked the journal from September to December. I liked all the personal reflections and the tasks which were very clear when we were on the serial-days. But it did go down after Christmas. I was rushing and trying to sort things out for it and it wasn't really my priority when I was on the block of School Experience.

Here, Rose illustrates what Hatton and Smith (1995) see as one of the central challenges of reflective practice i.e., that it is perceived as academic or esoteric in nature whilst teaching is fundamentally practice-orientated and focused on immediate and pragmatic action. Trying to find the balance and relationship between the two was the difficulty experienced by Rose. However, despite the challenges in managing a heavy workload, students still tended to agree on the value of reflective practice as taught by reflective writing:

> They always say after you teach a lesson, even when you have been at it for a couple of years, you always have to reflect on the list, (of teacher competences), it's good practice
>
> (Interview with Violet).

Poppy had a very similar perspective but in the following extract she shows how her reflective writing following a tutor visit was beginning to serve its main purpose i.e. helping her to action-plan for future practice. In her interview, she stated:

> At the start I just didn't really understand a reflective journal. I wasn't really sure what we had to do and what was expected in it. But then when you start to do the tasks you can begin to see the point of it.

That reflective writing came to be considered a useful practice was encouraging as it increased the likelihood that it would become embedded as a standard part of their teaching routine, if not after every lesson, at least, regularly.

Reflective writing as a support to professional learning

The participants had been introduced to the concept of reflective practice at the start of the year and so it was to be expected that due to the recency of their exposure to these new ideas, they commented at length in the focus groups. They clearly found the concept challenging in terms of seeing its relevance to their development as teachers, but as they began to complete the set tasks, reflecting on their visits to schools, it seemed that they began to see how it might be useful in helping to disentangle the multitude of experiences and challenges they were facing. In her journal, Daisy described it as follows:

> At the start when it was explained to us, to be honest I thought, what is this really all about, and is it really going to be beneficial to us? But since I've started it, I think it really focuses your thoughts and clears up what's happening. In your head there's a lot of things going on but it's all jumbled up. When you actually have to write it down it's easier to see how you're thinking and what is actually affecting you. …so now I've actually started to do it I really see the value in it and it makes sense to me.

Here Daisy highlights the value of reflective writing in terms of focusing her thoughts on what is actually happening *to* her in terms of the learning experiences she was undergoing.

At the beginning of the year, Rose too displayed a high level of enthusiasm for her developing capacity for reflective writing, she wrote:

> Before I started it a few weeks ago I was really daunted by it. I don't know whether I thought it was weird or I just wasn't sure how I would do it…but since doing it I've loved it. I've really actually loved it. It's like writing a little diary about my day and all the great things that happened, all the little things that concern me…it was actually quite therapeutic.

Over the course of the first term, participants began to develop a wider sense of the purpose the writing could serve, as illustrated by Rose's remark in the focus group:

> We began developing our writing with others and discussed things like how you got on, what your placement was like and whether you had done any further training. If there was an evening training event at the school, I would go and write about that. What you experienced was everything.

Here we can see that the purpose became more easily discernible when the participants regarded the nature of such an endeavour as essential to their holistic, professional formation rather than an academic assignment that would lead to a grade.

During the second set of data collection via individual interviews towards the end of the year, it was, however, the use of reflective writing in the self-assessment of teaching competence that proved to be most valuable for the students. Daisy noted that, after teaching a class:

> It was either highs or lows, but it was hard to understand what you were thinking or feeling because there was too much going on.

To some extent, reflective writing provided a solution to that dilemma, as outlined by Iris who said, 'You could write on what went well but also say I could improve on this'. For Lily, if a lesson went particularly badly, the reflective writing was viewed as a coping mechanism, 'If it all goes bad, you can start writing'. She also used humour to help recover her confidence, by writing, 'Well, no one died. Ha, ha, ha'.

Regarding the imperative to exact appropriate change as a result of having reflected on their lessons, Basil revealed that maintaining his reflective journal was helpful in reminding him to make any necessary adjustments since it is easy to get swept up in the 'busyness' of a primary classroom. In his interview he noted the importance of:

> reflecting on what the pupils understood by the lesson, if they didn't understand, you'd write up the next lesson trying to get that bit they didn't understand into the subsequent lesson.

As the second term unfolded, Violet and Daisy shared similar perspectives on how tutor visits were beginning to facilitate them in action-planning for future practice. In her interview, Violet stated:

> ....the best bit...was thinking about the tutor visits afterwards and planning what I was intending to do based on what they had said to me.

Turning to the topic of grading and feedback, participants frequently found that a practical critique of their reflective writing was helpful. For example, in a note at the end of one of Daisy's lesson plans, a visiting tutor wrote the following comment:

> ….too descriptive. No point in describing just what was happening. Wasn't going to learn from it. How do you know it worked? Give your reasons for thinking it worked.

When interviewed, Daisy said that she was 'able to see progress more easily' and that 'it was more effective...to have a tutor look at a draft'. Poppy appreciated how visiting tutors could 'pinpoint what [you] need to work on'.

However, not all students valued this form of tuition as witnessed in Florian's interview when he stated, 'It was okay but that's only a bit of feedback really because you haven't got marks'.

This student's preoccupation with marks obviously worked against him seeing the value of reflective writing as an important way to develop his practice.

Akin to the teaching of lessons, was the observation of their host teachers, which also seemed to benefit their capacity for reflection. Rose noted:

> We would observe, and I would find something that we experienced that we would want in our own classroom someday.

Put another way, it allowed students to record their aspirations for developing what they perceived to be good classroom practice. As the following extract will show, observing their teachers also helped to develop a critical capacity with regard to determining what they regarded as poor practice. Reflecting in her journal, Daisy wrote about how she was made to feel uncomfortable as a result of the teacher's approach to discipline:

> One concern was the teacher's method of discipline. I didn't like how she tended to give off to the child in front of the whole class as this seemed quite intimidating. I have decided that I would go about this differently, for example, take the child quietly to the side, as this made me feel quite uncomfortable.

Daisy determines her own approach as a result of her ability to empathise with the pupil she writes about. In this sense, she is beginning to formulate her action plan or script for how she intends to approach discipline in her classroom when she is teaching.

Discussion

Despite being a small-scale and context-specific study, the data collected has provided much pedagogical insight. At the outset, it was clear that the participants found the concept of reflection difficult to comprehend and somewhat daunting. The key challenges seemed to relate primarily to understanding purpose, knowing what to write about, knowing how to write and understanding expectations. The data provide insight into the stages the participants progressed through in developing their skill as reflective writers. In the beginning, their initial nervousness about learning the skill of reflective writing sometimes turned to scepticism about the value of the process itself, perhaps due to the level of personal revelation involved. This reflects the findings of similar studies on reflective practice in professional learning programmes (Jay and Johnson, 2002).

It seemed that part of the problem in understanding how to approach the reflective portfolio, despite having been provided with guidance which outlined its nature and purpose. This seemed to relate to the fact that they were coming from a highly structured, didactic pedagogical experience of secondary education (Cook and Leckey, 1999). There was a natural tendency for the participants to just want to 'be told' what to write without taking personal ownership and self-authorship (Hodge et al., 2009) of

their work. An additional dimension to this was that the participants' prior experience was heavily focused upon grade achievement and that the difficulties they experienced in relation to reflective activity, could have the potential to impact future achievement negatively. However, once the participants realised that reflective writing was not only an integral part of their degree programme, but also of becoming an effective practitioner, they began to value the practice and see it as worthwhile to their professional learning and development.

The debate around scaffolding reflective writing or otherwise proved to be significant in this study. The teacher education programme in question employed both a structured and unstructured approach to the promotion of reflective capacity. The reflective tasks in semester one were highly structured whilst those in semester two, less so. The structured tasks seemed to work well for the participants because, as the first semester progressed, it seemed that they began to see the value of reflective writing in terms of helping them clarify the multitude of professional learning experiences which they encountered. Hatton and Smith (1995) highlight the importance of balance between time for reflection and the immediate demands of practice. For the participants in this study, the greater challenge came in the second semester as the less-structured approach and the additional pressures of work in terms of everyday planning for teaching meant that the students tended to complete their reflective tasks because they were a requirement, rather than in a more meaningful way in order to enhance their competence and understanding. Maybe over time, as they gain experience and perspective, as outlined by Jay and Johnston (2002) they will begin to appreciate more, the value of reflection in bringing about deeper insights about their professional growth and teacher identity.

Conclusion and recommendations

Ultimately, the goal of reflective writing is to help students gain confidence and competence in weaving their new theoretical knowledge into pedagogical understanding and help shape their individual professional identities, as part of that process. To support this, it seemed that two specific approaches were particularly beneficial. Firstly, students were scaffolded in their writing using the framework provided by Welch (1999) with examples of the various dimensions of reflection (descriptive, affective, interpretative, and decisional) to be included in each entry. Many participants found these to be helpful prompts as a basis to support the development of their writing but as suggested by Boud and Walker (1998), for others, the framework led to a tendency towards formulaic writing without depth and with a purpose of fulfilling a requirement. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to suggest that students could be assisted further along their journey by allocating a greater portion of time to modelling writing and collaboratively deconstructing and discussing such exemplars.

Secondly, it appeared that tutor commentary on initial pieces of reflective writing was an effective and economical method for supporting learning about reflection. This feedback did not need to be extensive to prove worthwhile because students were able to understand the genre's demands by looking at their own attempts in the light of a 'more knowledgeable others' advice (Vygotsky, 1978). This dynamic illustrates Sfard and Prusak's (2005, pp.44-45) notion of identity formation as 'communicational practice' which can help change identities from 'actual' (current) to 'designated' (those aspired to or expected).

In addition to providing space and opportunity for authentic, guided practice, the use of peer feedback through collaboration is an important approach to developing reflective understanding and practice. Often, there is benefit to be gained in reading one's own and others' written work aloud and witnessing what others hear in terms of content, structure and indeed, omissions. Spending valuable time in this way might also shed some light on the fact that whilst the individual's perceptions are (and should be) present in their writing, connections and reference to relevant literature and policy can make them more informed and critical in nature.

The extent to which reflection can support the development of professional identities, which are 'collectively shaped' (Sfard and Prusak, 2005, p.45) over the course of time, remains to be seen. This is because much depends on the individual's willingness to engage appropriately, particularly in the face of real and pressing workload demands. Perhaps, this could be aided by the adoption of a coaching stance to teaching and learning and a more personalised and bespoke style of portfolio to help maintain a greater level of appeal for students as they mature into their reflective writing and practice. The Reflective Approach to Teaching Practicum Debriefing (RATPD) purported by Minott (2021), as helping guide students to think about the larger, over-arching questions that drive their professional formation may also be useful in this regard.

With increasing digitisation of learning, it also seems logical that increasingly sophisticated, digital formats need to be developed that support the development of reflective capacity and allow professionals to present evidence of their theorised practice and by extension, identity formation, in ways that speak to themselves and relevant others.

It seems clear that although reflection is generally regarded as a useful and important dimension of most teacher education programmes in terms of raising consciousness and reasoning about teaching and influencing the professional identity of the teacher, if it is be made more purposeful, novice teachers need to be given time, structured support and personalised feedback to engage appropriately. Further research may consider how teacher education programmes can be designed to allow for this as well as to consider how collaborative reflection can be used to enhance professional learning. Fundamentally, reflection in professional learning and practice needs to be seen not only as an introspective and backward-looking personal exercise, but more importantly as a collaborative and futures-thinking endeavour.

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