

## **Reflective practice as a space for pre-service teachers to engage with critical ideology reflection**

The “Review of the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland” (Sahlberg, 2012) instigated an on-going process of rationalisation of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers into collaborative Centres of Excellence coupled with the introduction of reconceptualised models of ITE at both concurrent and consecutive levels. One of the outcomes of the 2012 Sahlberg Report, was the introduction of a two-year Masters level ITE qualification to replace the one-year diploma. This model replicated the post-graduate ITE model already in existence in Finland and embedded in an education system which was identified as a “good model” and “a witness of successful transformation of public education” (Sahlberg p2, 2015). Prior to this and underpinned by the Bologna process, teacher education systems across European countries had begun to converge along a parallel structural path (Harford, 2010) which was epitomised by a “universitisation of teacher education and the concomitant professionalisation of teaching” (Harford, p 249, 2010). The new model signalled a paradigm shift in the ITE landscape in Ireland and was characterised by new requirements and new praxis.

This new praxis included an accentuated emphasis on the **Reflective practice** of pre-service teachers, on fostering **Critical reflection** and on the development of **Reflective practitioners**. Alongside this enhanced focus on reflection is evidence highlighting the difficulties of set down requirements (McGarr and McCormack, 2014) and the disappointing levels of engagement (Bruster and Peterson, 2013).

This paper delves into and explores the challenges and difficulties pre-service teachers experience in developing critical reflective practice skillsets as exemplified through a two-stage case study which included pre-service teachers (Stage One) and university-based and school-based teacher educators (Stage Two). The study investigated the complex nature of reflective practice within a consecutive postgraduate teacher education programme at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Republic of Ireland.

The paper concludes by exploring the role of teacher education providers and particularly the role of the lecturers, school placement tutors and cooperating teachers in order to successfully embed a reflection framework which offers greater opportunity for critical ideology reflection.

The study aimed to:

1. Explore the presence of critical thinking in pre-service teachers’ reflections.
2. Determine the presence of and use of the four lenses outlined by Brookfield (2017)
3. Observe the extent to which critique reinforces prevailing beliefs or provides opportunities for critical ideology reflection.

4. Explore the presence of anxiety in pre-service teachers on practicum and evidence of students acting as/acknowledging their roles as change agents

The study's objectives informed the formulation of the following primary research question;

*What levels of critical thinking do pre-service teachers rely on while constructing their reflections on practice and to what extent does their critique within reflections reinforce prevailing beliefs or provide opportunities for critical ideology reflection?*

Edwards and Thomas (2010) suggest that the question for teacher educators when addressing reflective practice is not a technician one but rather a values-based one. Indeed the literature indicates that many models and methods have been utilised and critiqued which support pre-service teachers' reflective practice. For example, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996) describe how when they asked students to keep daily journals it was unsuccessful in terms of critical reflection as the journals became "chronologies of daily events". Other models and existing frameworks of reflective practice (e.g. Gibbs (1988), Schön (1987), Johns (2000)) also offer useful strategies which may enable pre-service teachers to engage in meaningful reflection. More recently reflective writing pedagogical frameworks such as Brookfield (2017) are said to support enhanced levels of criticality, with students more likely to move beyond focusing on the basic mechanics of teaching and reach levels of critical ideology reflection.

## **Methodology**

Given the current climate of ambiguity regarding social cohesion, political stability and peace in Europe and worldwide the importance of providing a skillset and space for pre-service teachers to engage in a meaningful way with critical ideology is crucial. The authors, cognisant of this significance, designed and implemented a reflection framework before, during and after pre-service teacher school placement practicums. The framework included a pre-service teacher reflective practice induction lecture, reading, written tasks and feedback which the pre-service teachers completed before/during and after the school placement practicum. The framework applied a scaffolded approach and was underpinned by the theoretical understandings offered by Brookfield (2017). Ethical approval to conduct the empirical research was sought and granted from the authors' HEI School of Education Ethics Committee. Recruitment for the study was voluntary among pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers in practicum schools, school placement tutors (assessors) and pedagogy lecturers. Participants were not obliged to participate and could withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice. All participants were provided with information documentation about the study and gave explicit written consent for their contributions to be included in the study data. The case study was supported by the Teaching Council of Ireland.

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the Stage One reflective work submissions (n=160) from a cohort of pre-service teachers (cohort 1) in the year preceding the introduction of the reflection framework and a cohort of pre-service teachers (cohort 2)

who engaged with the reflection framework during their teacher education practicum studies. The comparative analysis included (n=80) student reflections from cohort 1 and (n=80) from cohort 2.

The paper then progresses to explore and analyse data from semi-structured interviews (guided by the case-study research question) conducted with cooperating teachers in practicum schools, school placement tutors (assessors) and pedagogy lecturers, all of whom worked in varying roles as teacher educators with pre-service teachers from cohort 1 (n=80) and cohort 2 (n=80).

In order to encourage critical engagement the mode (written reflective pieces) rather than model (Brookfield's lenses) was critiqued.

The analysis of the Stage One pre-service teachers' data involved isolating 'significant moments', identifying hegemonic assumptions, and determining the level of critical ideology challenge present in the practicum school placement while analysis within Stage Two focused on capturing teacher educators' understanding of the reflective practice process and the role they play within the pre-service teachers' reflective practice .

### **Conclusions/Expected outcomes/Findings**

Findings indicate that reflective writing frameworks, such as Brookfield (2017), support enhanced levels of criticality, where students are more likely to move beyond focusing on the "nuts and bolts" of teaching. While levels of criticality are raised in terms of unearthing assumptions, crucially, engaging with critical ideology reflection is evident to a lesser extent. Without this key stage reflective work, in some cases, it became a platform to reinforce a set of existing beliefs and values rather than fully critique.

Findings indicate that the scaffolded framework supported pre-service teachers' identification of assumptions and the set of values and beliefs which guide both practice in schools and their own practice. However deeper ideology critique still remains unexamined in a significant amount of reflective work.

To challenge ideology we need to be aware of 'how it lives within us and works against us by furthering the interests of others' (Brookfield, 2017). The findings also reveal that there is a significant challenge for teacher educators to support pre-service teachers to understand and implement a model which in practice should raise levels of criticality in terms of unearthing assumptions. One of the major hurdles for teacher educators lies in the challenge of successfully embedding a reflection framework with pre-service teachers which moves beyond the question of how do we teach reflective practice to a values-based one into which reflective practices do we wish to guide our pre-service teachers?

This paper suggests adopting a less linear approach to engaging and capturing pre-service teacher reflective practice. This paper also reimagines the place of the written reflection submission and explores creative pedagogical approaches to reflective practice such as, drama, visual arts, oral vignettes, music, sculpture and the possibilities of collaborative reflection.

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