Beginning Secondary Teacher Candidates and Reflective Teaching: The Role of a Critical Friends Group

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Abstract

This study examined the perceived role of a "critical friends group" (CFG) in the development of beginning teacher candidates' (TCs) understandings and practices of reflective practice. I collected and analyzed documents of secondary teacher candidates and recorded interviews with nine (9) TCs at the conclusion of a course/practicum to gain insights into the TCs' developing understandings and practices of reflective practice. Three broad lessons learned and reinforced through this investigation include:

1. Critical reflection does occur in beginning TC's practice,
2. Critical reflection does not take place in isolation, and
3. Calling a group "critical friends" does not guarantee critical thinking or friendship.

Background

During their initial field experience at "River City University" (RCU), TCs maintain a reflective teaching journal throughout their placements. In addition to summarizing activities, the journal assignment requires critical analysis of experiences and interactions. In past practice, reflective journals had always been considered "private" rather than "public". TCs submitted their journal entries to the online "dropbox," and I provided individualized feedback on content and quality of reflection.

As I sought ways to foster reflection, it became apparent that the private reflective journal assignment – while providing space for personal risks – limited more open, collaborative, and cooperative conversations about teaching and learning. In an effort to support TCs in developing a more critically reflective stance, I began an investigation into (a) how beginning TCs understood and practiced teacher reflection and (b) how or if a critical friends group (CFG) would support TCs as they engage in critical reflection in their journals.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How do beginning secondary TCs at RCU, in their first supervised practicum experience, understand the concept of reflection?

(2) (How) does a reflective teaching journal help beginning TCs engage in critical reflection?

(3) (How) does a CFG support beginning teachers to become critically reflective in their journals?

Research Methods

The project relied upon traditional qualitative methods of data collection, including the generation, collection, and analysis of documents, interviews, and observations (Creswell, 2007). I collected three main types of data, including course assignments, interviews, and observations.

Results

Understandings of Reflection Over Time

Ellen	Over time, Ellen grew to see reflection as extending beyond mere technique in the classroom. Whereas reflection once heavily weighted thinking for Ellen, action now played a more prominent role in her thinking about reflectivity.
Megan	Megan's early definition of critical reflection took into account multiple dimensions of reflection, including both the inward and outward shifting and processing that moves one beyond technical reflection. Megan grew to see reflection less as an individual activity and more as a social process of seeking formative feedback from colleagues and students.
Ericka	Ericka consistently defined a critically reflective teacher as someone who questioned their teaching practices, considered their teaching context, and sought continuous improvement.

Reflective Teaching Journal Practices

Ellen	Ellen frequently used the journal to take personal/emotional risks and express vulnerability. She raised questions like "Why had I failed to rise to the occasion?" and focused mostly on teaching technique and practical issues related to classroom management.
Megan	Megan used her journal to interrogate social inequities observed at her site. In one entry, she analyzed a situation of a group of adolescents taunting a classmate for his "really longer hair." Megan considered how systems of power (e.g., patriarchy, masculinity) play a significant role in defining acceptable or "official" knowledges, behaviors (e.g., dress), and attitudes.
Ericka	Ericka's reflective teaching entries demonstrated several key aspects associated with critical reflection, including focusing on social and political issues, raising questions, interrogating assumptions, and being vulnerable.

Role of CFGs

Ellen	The CFG served as a "support system" for Ellen. In addition to mental health benefits, the CFG provided opportunities for Ellen try on a variety of perspectives.
Megan	While Megan found value in consistent in-class debriefing with her CFG, she experienced what she described as "pushback" on her ideas, which led to her overall disappointment of the CFG experiment. In addition to the pushback, Megan's CFG did not provide any online feedback on her reflective teaching entry submissions.
Ericka	While Ericka focused on structural aspects of schooling and socialization in her written reflections, she recognized her CFG's conversations and reflections were frequently shallow. Although Ericka perceived herself to have become more reflective during the semester, she did not see the CFG as a universal remedy for critical thinking.

Discussion & Implications

Critical reflection does occur in beginning TCs' practice
Whether preservice teachers are developmentally ready for the task of critical reflection has been up for debate in the research on teacher reflection. Skeptics argue teaching is a technical activity, therefore, TCs should be directed to focus on the means and ends, rather than on the moral, ethical, and sociopolitical dimensions of teaching. Observations indicate TCs have the capacity to move beyond technical and practical levels of reflection. In many instances, TCs strive toward critical reflection without needing instructor encouragement. At the same time educators must nurture critical reflection, it is important to recognize a number of impediments to fostering critical reflection in TCs, including the high-stakes, summative assessment known as the Teacher Performance Assessment or edTPA.

Critical reflection does not take place in isolation
No teacher, in isolation, is capable of single-handedly effecting the long-term, necessary changes in any school. While teachers need supportive peers, they also need peers who will challenge, debate, and critique them in going beyond the business as usual approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. As I continue to model and encourage reflective teaching in practice, future collaborations with cooperating teachers at school sites on ways to encourage and support reflective practice is a key goal for furthering the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with critically reflective teachers.

Calling a group "critical friends" does not guarantee critical thinking or friendship
While CFGs hold potential as sites of/for transformation, criticality and friendship take more work than can be assigned/accomplished during the course of one semester. Although the CFG is not a panacea for critical reflection or friendship, experience holds potential as preparation for future critical reflection. When TCs eventually encounter school realities, they will have limited choices: (1) to acquiesce to current practices, (2) to exit the profession, (3) to alter their classroom only, or (4) to deliberate with colleagues Arguably, teachers who have critically reflective preparation are in a better position than those who have not been prepared to be critically reflective to choose the route of collaborative dialogue.

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