

Topic: How will professional development focused on reflection and reflective journal writing impact the beginning teacher's instructional strategies?

Problem / Rationale

What can be done to help the beginning teacher thrive and survive during his or her first year in the elementary classroom? This was my focus as I tried to develop a professional development component that would encourage five beginning teachers at North Glade Elementary to reflect and plan instructions geared toward meeting the needs of every learner in his or her classroom. This form of reflective practice was planned for the beginning teacher's classroom because it provides the opportunity for the beginning teacher to observe, use past experiences and judgment to make informed decisions about instructional practices. As Dewey (1991) likens reflection to a man traveling an unfamiliar road where he has to make a decision. This reflection, he contends, mirrors the decision the teacher takes as he or she reflects and discovers facts about his or her instructional practices that he or she will later use to serve the purpose of improving instruction.

The need for a focus on reflection was identified as I worked as a literacy coach with six beginning teachers. From my observations, I noticed that when these beginning teachers were involved in some form of reflection, such as a post observation to a lesson demonstration, they were better able to identify the specific needs of their struggling readers and identify alternative strategies that they could use to help students progress in reading. My belief was that engaging in reflection, both the beginning teacher and his or her students will benefit through this process.

This study was implemented with five beginning teachers, four females and one male. These teachers were involved in professional development that introduced and taught reflective thinking skills. They also kept a reflective journal for three weeks in which they used five questions to guide their reflective thinking after teaching reading lessons.

Research

The importance of reflection in the life of a teacher is often discussed in educational circles. Brookfield, Stephen (1995), in *Becoming a Critical Reflective Teacher*, states “Simple utilitarianism dictates that critical reflection is an important habit for teachers to develop. Becoming critically reflective increases the probability that we will take informed actions.” These informed actions I believe will ultimately benefit our students.

Renewed interest in the role of the reflective practitioner has also been influenced by educational researcher Donald Schon, 1983. Schon, defines reflection in terms of how researchers use practical knowledge to conduct ‘frame experiments’ in which past experiences and previous knowledge help to make sense of new and unusual situations or problems in the classroom. Therefore, the reflective practitioner comes to a new understanding based on the process of framing or developing an understanding of an idea or situation, reframing that understanding followed by experimentation and ‘back-talk’. Back-talk is important in this process as it provides the opportunity for the reflective practitioner to have a ‘reflective conversation’ in which implication of the situation that is being reflected on is discussed, understood and an action plan is

developed. Through this process the reflective practitioner is able to construct new knowledge about his or her practice.

Data / Tools

Four data sources were used in the research process:

1. pre and post Reflective surveys
2. Professional development workshop focused on reflection
3. Reflective journaling
4. Classroom observations and discussions.

A professional development session was used to teach the beginning teachers the important role that reflection plays in students' achievement and how to create and use a reflective journal. Classroom observations were used to compare each teacher's reflective journal entries with anecdotal data collected from classroom observations.

The first reflective practitioner survey was used to identify beginning teachers who were actively involved in reflection, the teachers' favorite instruction delivery method and the teachers' views about reflection. In the second survey, they explained what was gained from being involved in reflective journal writing and how participation in this project impacted their instructional practice and students' learning.

Analysis

After analyzing the reflective journals, the results were entirely different than what I had expected. First, I was provided with an opportunity to reflect on my leadership

style as a Reading Coach. The number of completed journals was far below my expectations. In my opinion, this speaks to some extent to the degree in which I did or did not make it clear to the participants my expectations regarding their reflective journals. The participants revealed that the reflective journal writing was a difficult task to complete because they had never been consciously involved in the process of reflection before.

Overall, the results of this research indicate that both the beginning teachers and students benefited from this project as it provided the opportunity for the beginning teacher to closely examine their instructional styles and look at alternative methodologies to meet the needs of every child in their classrooms. The teachers' journals provided evidence that reflective journal writing forced the beginning teachers to systematically plan and teach reading on a daily basis. This produced many sparks of insight that influenced instructional strategies and eventually learning outcomes in the classroom. For example, one beginning teacher, who gave his students a chance to develop 'teacher like questions', wrote, "Today I decided to allow a couple of my students to role play as teacher. This learning activity was great. My only regret is not doing this sooner." Other insights include the need for collaboration among beginning teachers and veteran teachers and the need for the process of reflection to be continued.

Policy Recommendations

The process of reflection should be taught and emphasized throughout the preservice years. There should be a greater emphasis placed on needs assessment of the beginning teacher so that appropriate help can be provided at the start of the school year.

Support of the beginning teacher is of outmost importance if they are to develop into reflective practitioners. The Reading Coach plays a very important role in this area of support and must therefore be an expert in his or her field in order to provide the level of support and mentorship that beginning teachers need.

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