Reflection on Practice as a Lifelong Learning Process: A Survey of the Views of Croatian Preschool Student Teachers

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ABSTRACT Reflection can be defined as ‘a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and to inform learning about practice’ (Reid, 1993, p.305). Reflection on practice therefore can be conceptualised as lifelong learning—a form of learning and thinking, a meaningful self-evaluation, about one’s action or practice and how that action or practice might be improved: it is about continuous review of practice experience with a view to improving practice or achieving a positive change. Reflection on practice is important for experienced teachers as it is for student teachers. In Croatia, ‘teaching’ preschool student teachers how to reflect on practice during their in-service training experience is often regarded as the ‘first step’ towards developing reflective practitioners and in preparing them for careers in early-years education. All these explain perhaps why a requirement to undergo specific training in the techniques or methods of reflection is embedded in the course content for in-service professional education and training for preschool teachers. The aim of this brief paper is to present the results of a survey of preschool student teachers’ views about their training on the methods of reflective practice. The analysis of the results suggests that a majority of the preschool student teachers considered reflective practice as a lifelong learning process. It is also clear that students preferred to use a particular reflective method—i.e. verbalising their thoughts to peers—over methods such as written notes and audio/video recording.

Key words: Reflection on/Reflective practice, Training methods, Lifelong learning
**Introduction**

Reflection on practice can be seen as an intersection or a meeting point between theory and practice in order to raise ‘consciousness’ of one’s own actions. It is the process in which the theory, practice, and personal beliefs and actions are fused together with a view to improve professional practice. In Croatia, the professional roles of a teacher is changing: this is due, in part, to the frequent changes in the country’s social and educational policies. Such changes have had impacts on how teacher education is organised and on what is taught in in-service teacher education and training institutions. As a result, teacher education and training institutions now demand that student teachers not only have the requisite skills to 'constantly' engage and question their professional practice (see Coolahan, 2002), but also to reflect on their “approach, personal beliefs, etc” ... with a view to improving competence and professional practice (Babić, 1999, p. 32). Arends (1990) posits that an effective teacher should have the skills necessary for reflection and problem solving, and should perceive learning as a continuous, lifelong learning process. Edwards et al.’s (2002) conception of lifelong learning focuses on the accumulation of skills and qualifications as a means of coping with changes and uncertainty in professional practice—they believe that lifelong learning is an important tool for developing a habit for reflective practice.

To achieve effective integration of educational practices, preschool teachers need to develop competencies in thinking skills—especially in “strategic management of the thinking process and learning through self-governing including planning, conscious guidance, monitoring and evaluation” as well as improving competencies in meta-cognitive actions including self-reflection and self-evaluation (Moseley et al. cited in Baumfield and Devlin, 2005, p.40). In other to be able to critically analyse their practice, preschool teachers need an “intellectual and moral sovereignty” (Schelsky cited in Masschelein, 2000, p. 605).

As already stated, there is a connection between reflection and educational practice in that, according to Elliott et al. cited in Stoll and Fink (2000, p. 208), on the one hand, “reflection initiates action: research of a particular problem leads to new insights which demand a change in a certain aspect of teaching.” On the other hand, “action initiates reflection: a certain aspect of teaching is changed as a reaction to a certain practical problem and the teacher monitors effectiveness and changes on his or her own, which leads to new insights.”

Sharing experience and ideas, thinking and reflecting enhance teachers’ personal and professional development. In Croatia, the professional education of preschool teachers presupposes that there is a module on, or training section in, re-
reflective practice methods during which students are expected to develop requisite skills in reflective practice. To this end—indeed, in order to help students to relate/link theoretical knowledge with teaching placement/practical experience—a ‘mentoring team’ is created to mediate in the teaching and learning process (see also Šagud, 2006). The mentoring team—whose role is to guide and monitor the students—is made up of a preschool teacher in the kindergarten, the teaching placement, and a teacher from the Faculty of Teacher Education at J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. During reflective practice classes, students not only participate actively in the teaching and learning process, but also have the opportunity to become aware of their own ‘implicit knowledge’ with a little help from the mentoring team (see also Miljak, 2007).

The aim of this research reported in the following paragraphs is to gain insights into student teachers’ views about the particular reflective methods taught in their classes or training sessions on reflection on practice during their in-service teacher education and training.

**Research methodology**

The main data collection instrument for the research is survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed and given to 34 third-year students of preschool education. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the first part contained general questions on reflection and the purpose of reflection; the second part contained questions on the particular reflective methods taught in their classes or training sessions on reflection on practice; the third part had a set of open-ended questions designed to collect students’ views or suggestions about the particular reflective methods/techniques taught on their reflective methods training. It will be noted that the questionnaire was administered or given to students at one of the reflective methods classes. Normally, reflective methods classes take place in the third year of study, after student teachers have already gained basic knowledge of the principles, patterns and characteristics of human psychosomatic development, theoretical approaches on education of pre-school children and developmental effects of raising children in different social and cultural contexts.

**Results**

The analysis of the results is a follows:

When asked to define reflection, 19 student teachers—or 56%—characterised
reflection as ‘feedback’ [on students’ actions during the practice experience]; 4 students—or 12%—defined reflection as the ‘ability to evaluate or to self-evaluate’; 3 students said reflection means ‘acquiring knowledge and skills’; another 3 students characterised reflection as ‘personal experience’; 4 student teachers did not give any definition of reflection. These results suggests that most student teachers understand reflection as ‘feedback’ from tutors and mentors on their actions—in other words, they view feedback as a control mechanism for their own actions.

The student teachers believed that reflection, as a part of their in-service/teacher education and training, primarily serves as a means to acquire knowledge and skills (mentioned by 27 students or 79%); to form attitudes (mentioned by 4 students); to self-regulate (mentioned by 3 students). None of the student teachers saw reflection as a means of developing creativity, although this was suggested to the students in the questionnaire. It may be said that the students’ answers point to an ‘instrumental view’ of reflection. It is also possible that the students’ answers were informed by the however increasing marketisation of education provision in Croatia.

Table 1: Students’ assessment of reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1 (2.9%)</th>
<th>2 (11.8%)</th>
<th>3 (26.5%)</th>
<th>4 (58.8%)</th>
<th>5 (79%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection is an integral part of the preschool teachers’ profession.</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection helps better understand children and their development.</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection is a process that requires a lot of effort and time of the preschool teacher.</td>
<td>4 (11.8%)</td>
<td>7 (20.6%)</td>
<td>12 (35.3%)</td>
<td>3 (8.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection is an integral part of the preschool teachers’ lifelong learning.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>12 (35.3%)</td>
<td>21 (61.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reflection process points out the faults and not virtues of the preschool teacher.</td>
<td>12 (35.3%)</td>
<td>5 (14.7%)</td>
<td>10 (29.4%)</td>
<td>6 (17.6%)</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection is an important part of training in methods of reflective practice.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5 (14.7%)</td>
<td>7 (20.6%)</td>
<td>22 (64.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students were also presented with different statements concerning reflection, and were asked to assess their level of agreement with each of the statements. Students ‘agree the least’ with the statement that the reflection process primarily points out faults and not virtues of a preschool teacher (12 students or 25% ‘disagree’ with the statement). On the other hand, 22 students (65%) ‘completely agree’ with the statement that reflection is an important part of their teacher training; 21 students (or 62%) see reflection as lifelong learning—is defined in this context as a learning action or activity undertaken throughout professional practice. This shows that students see reflection as a multidimensional, continuous process that takes place even after they have graduated.

When asked to think about reflection on practice from the point of view of (future) professional practice, the students considered reflection as an opportunity to improve their own competencies (mentioned by 13 students or 38%); an opportunity to improve education practice (mentioned by 12 students); an opportunity for personal growth and development (mentioned by 4 students); as a prerequisite to advance in their teaching profession (mentioned by 2 students). One student considered reflective practice as a process of becoming aware of certain implicit pedagogies; two students considered reflective practice as a combination of all factors mentioned above. What is interesting to note is that student teachers viewed reflection on practice from both personal (improving own competencies) and social perspectives (improving education practice). The students’ answers were not unexpected if one considers the fact that the professional education of preschool teachers in Croatia is based on developing certain competencies and couple with the fact that preschool education is situated to all intents and purposes in social science.

When students were asked to state their particular approach to or methods of reflection as thought in classes on reflective practice, the students said they preferred to talk or verbalise their thoughts to their peers (an approach favoured 25 students or 74%); 8 students (or 24%) preferred written documentation; one student preferred to talk or verbalise their thoughts to the preschool placement teacher-supervisor [mentor]. None of the students expressed preference for using audio/video records, reflection diary or ‘evaluation scales,’ even though they have all been taught or trained in the use these methods use in reflective training classes.

The analysis of the student questionnaire also indicates that the student teachers considered the main purpose of their reflective training classes as ‘connecting theory with practice’ (mentioned by 17 students or 50%). Other answers were: ‘improving practical skills’ (mentioned by 9 students); becoming ‘aware of [their]
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own competencies’ (mentioned by 7 students); or a combination of all the above factors (mentioned by one student). It will be noted that studies by Šagud (2006) and Miljak (2007) similarly found that students consider the main purpose of reflection as connecting theory with practice.

The students were also asked to give their suggestions for improving [methods/techniques] the reflection process used in their reflective training classes. 19 students (or 56%) would not change anything; 7 students would increase the number of classes for reflective method training; 3 students believe that methods used in reflective practice lessons will have been more effective if students were better prepared for reflective practice lessons; 2 students would try to improve the quality of communication between students and the mentoring team; 2 students find that a mandatory inclusion of all students into reflective methods classes would bring improvement. One student said that the use of audio and video records made during reflective practice lessons are necessary for reflection/reflective process.

Conclusion

The results of this research point to a contradiction in the professional education of preschool teachers in Croatia. On the one hand, preschool student teachers see reflection as a process (i.e. of acquiring competencies). On the other hand, they see reflection as an opportunity to improve education practice and to learn about children and their development (the so-called general social usefulness of reflection on practice). Students also find reflection on practice is an important part of their professional education such that they would like to have more classes on methods or techniques of reflective practice. This desire by the students for more classes on methods/techniques of reflective practice can be explained by the fact that, at the moment, they generally prefer to verbalise their thoughts to their peers and less able to write up or provide a written account of their reflection—an approach which contradicts the generally acceptable practice of written reflection. Also, the students mostly agree that reflection on practice is an integral part of lifelong learning and that it forms an important basis for their future personal and professional development. In conclusion, reflection is a tool that helps us to define problems and deal with the challenges of learning—for example, it can be used to ‘deepen our knowledge … and gain new insights’ (Russso and Ford, 2006, p. 1). Developing the reflective practice skills of future preschool teachers is a lifelong learning process and should be embedded in early-year in-service teacher education and training.
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Notes

1. In this paper the term "method" can be interpreted as "educational method", and not used in the context of research methodology.

2. There were 37 third-year-students in 2008/2009, and 34 of them took part in the research.

3. In the Republic of Croatia the education of pre-school teachers (according to Bologna process) is conducted in the form of a three-year professional undergraduate study programme, where the students obtain professional education and are awarded the professional title of baccalaureus or baccalaurea pre-school teachers. At this point, there are five faculties offering the three-year professional undergraduate study programme in Croatia, and 40 students per year enrol this programme.

4. The students expressed their level of agreement with the given statements numerically, by means of a Likert scale, as follows: 1 = I disagree; 2 = I partially agree; 3 = I agree and disagree (I don't know); 4 = I mostly agree; 5 = I agree completely.

5. Students are currently divided into smaller groups in order to meet the requirements of the Bologna process.
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College Leaders’ Conceptions of Creativity and its Application to English Further Education

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ABSTRACT The work reported in this paper is part of a larger study that explored creativity in English further education. The paper is based on interviews with chief executive officers and principals of six English further education colleges. A major aim of the interviews was to explore the college leaders’ conceptual understanding of creativity as applied to English further education. The interviews also aimed amongst other things to examine college institutional factors and how they impact upon creativity from perspectives of college leaders. We found that the college leaders not only showed familiarity with the concepts of creativity, their characterisation of creativity into the largely overlapping themes of process, personality and the environment accords with the well established literature themes of creativity. However, there is a little evidence of institutional appetite for creativity in teaching and learning even though the leaders appear to be personally committed to the principles of creativity.

Keywords: Creative, Creativity, Teaching and learning, College, Further education, Curriculum