INTRODUCING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE TO TEACHERS IN AN ENGLISH MEDIUM LOWER SECONDARY PRIVATE SCHOOL IN CHITRAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports insight from an action research conducted to introduce and improve the reflective practice among teachers working in a secondary private school in rural Pakistan. It was found that though very challenging to familiarize the teachers with the concept and practice of reflection, this concept is a power school based teacher learning model especially in a context where teachers have nominal exposure to in-service professional development. However, the low capacity of teachers in pedagogy, their traditional beliefs on professional development as well as the shortage of time are the factors hindering reflective practice. It is suggested that instead of depending on workshops and literature on reflection, focusing real classroom issues and providing ongoing support to teachers could be helpful in initiating and sustaining reflective practice.

Key words: Action research, Reflective practice, Rural Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is considered not so new notion as it has been around for centuries (Newton, 2004). However, the concept of reflection has become a byword for the last two decades for good practice in teaching and teacher education (Baxand Cullen, 2003). Regardless the emergence of reflective practice in teaching and learning, reflection is a dominant notion in current educational literature considered to be significant for continuous professional development of teachers. Nikolou-Walker and Garnett (2004) argue that self-reflective learning promotes an understanding of oneself in the workplace and provokes questions about one's identity and the need for self-change. Reflection helps people to open their hearts and minds to the experiences of others, to acknowledge their wisdom and understand their resources, strengths and needs (Reed andKoliba, 1995). Glazer, Abbott and Harris (2004) believe that reflection is one of the authentic and valuable parts of teacher professional development. They found that reflection helped the participant teachers look for solutions to the problems raised in reflective sessions and meetings. Through reflections, teachers take the responsibility of their own learning and become critical to their own beliefs and teaching(Hamlin, 2004). On the other hand, unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations (Larrivee, 2000).

Despite the enormous role and importance of reflection in teacher development, this model of teacher learning is uncommon among teachers especially in developing context.Rarieya (2005) argues that teachers in developing world are unaware of the term reflection and reflective practice. To her, even those who know reflection are unable to be effectively engaged in it. She concludes that in context like Pakistan where the quality of teacher training and its corresponding outcomes are questionable, reflective dialogue is definitely an alternative professional strategy for teachers. Moreover, in Pakistani context especially in the remote areas such as Chitral[*],theteachers have the nominal exposure to other sources of professional development. The lack of resources and time, geographical remoteness and unavailability of human resources such as professional experts are some of the factors limiting professional development opportunities for the teachers of this context. One of the most effective solutions to this problem seems the introduction of reflective practice to teachers so that they can keep themselves updated through reflecting on their professional practices and instructional decisions.

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[*] A remote and mountainous district of Khyber PukhtunkhwaProvice, Pakistan

On the other hand, the teachers who even have the exposure to personal and professional development need to be reflective enough to adjust their new teaching strategies into the particular classroom situations to better help students having diverse backgrounds. The experiences of working with teachers of different educational sectors in this context reveal that some of the teachers have the idea of reflection but their reflections mostly focus on students' attitude and behavior rather than focusing their own teaching. This kind of reflection often makes students responsible for de-motivated learning behavior. Thus, the superficial level of reflection becomes responsible for teachers professional stagnation rather than becoming a tool for professional development. Hence, it can be said that the teachers in this context need facilitation of outsiders to be exposed to reflective practices in their respective systems, schools and classrooms. This study aims at supporting teachers in improving their reflective practices through working with them at their workplace.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since reflection is new concept for teachers in the context of Chitral, the teachers in any school would have been the purposeful sample for this action research. Anyhow, a school was selected based on a few criteria such as the accessibility of the school as well as the willingness of the teachers. In the selected school, only three willing teachers were the focus of this action research.

As the notion of reflection is equally complex, even more complex is the process of introducing it to teachers and to make them reflective practitioner. To overcome the anticipated and unanticipated complexities, the researcher used action research model of Lewin (cited inKemmis et al, 2004). The model goes in a spiral way such as plan, act, observe, and reflect and revise the plan based on the data analysis. In order to move on systematically and to inform the planning processes, first, their existing perceptions and practices of reflections were explored. For this purpose, formal and informal interviews, classroom observations and post lesson discussions were the tools and procedures to generate data. The first action step was planned and implemented based on the existing situation. The researcher conducted a two days school based workshop for teachers on effective teaching and reflective practice. In these sessions, teachers were provided with ideas and strategies to reflect upon their teaching practices. They were also provided with literature on reflection for their extensive reading and understanding. The researcher shared a few questions in order to guide their reflections and to make them specific and focused. They were also instructed to maintain reflective journals to note down their reflections.

The teachers started teaching and reflecting focusing their instructional successes and limitations in the classrooms. The participants were also encouraged to capture critical incidents happening during teaching. Using a purposefully developed checklist, their lessons were observed and post observation discussionswere held with the teachers on regular basis to develop their reflective skills through critical questioning with regard to the lessons observed. As a reflective coach, the researcher sometimes challenged the teachers' ideas, validated their reflections, showed disagreement in agreeable manner and raised critical questions. The teachers shared their reflections and the researcher regularly went through their reflective journals, marked debatable points and discussed with them the next day.

The analysis of data collected during the implementation of first action revealed that the teachers were lacking in sound pedagogies. They were not developing lessons plans. Since they were not used to setting SMART objectives for lessons, they had no clear idea of what to achieve and how to achieve. This situation also influenced the nature of their reflections as they just described their activities as happened in the classrooms. Moreover, the teachers had not been able to fully comprehend the literature given in English. Therefore, they were provided with literature on reflection in Urdu language. Based on the lessons learnt, the researcher conducted some sessions on setting objectives and designing activities to achieve those objectives. They were given further ideas on reflection especially to critically and deeply reflect on their practices. Moreover, some sample reflections were also shared with them. The researcher planned the lessons with the teachers and taught some model lessons in the classroom. Then the teachers started planning lessons and implementing them in classrooms. The researcher observed their lessons, conducted post lesson discussions and analyzed their reflective journals.

The researcher regularly collected field notes and developed them into reflective journal. Moreover, some of the post lesson discussions were audio recorded. The classrooms were observed using a checklist and further data were collected from their reflective journals to enrich the reflections maintained by the researcher. The data collected through these sources were regularly analyzed to inform the action steps and to be conscious to the frequently emerging themes. The results emerging from the final analysis of the data are presented below.

RESULTS

Current Situations of Teacher Learning and Reflection

The research participants (teachers) consider teaching a difficult job and attachhigh importance to the role of a teacher. With regard to teacher learning,Ziauddin[†]believes, "A teacher can enhance his personal and professional expertise working hard and getting help from others". While Sharifullahbelieves that a teacher can enhance his personal and professional growth getting more and more education. It is important to note that both the teachers ignore the aspect of reflection that a teacher can improve his/her practices while reflecting upon his/her practices and learning from work based experiences. The post observation discussions also revealed that they lack reflective attitude.Ziauddin teaching the lesson on "Our Great Heroes" asked all the students to read the lesson one by one after doing a model reading. He reflected that "Asking all the students for individual reading, was the strength of my lesson because all the students had the opportunity to learn the lesson".

Likewise in another lesson,Sharifullah taught in a similar way and did a model reading four times and wrote some new words on the black board and asked the students to give the meanings of the words. In response to my question about individual reading, he became defensive by saying, "it was to develop reading skills and reading is a part of the language. I have done right what I have done". Both the teachers could not find any room for improvement in their lessons and, therefore, found no alternatives to do the things differently. They believed that some of the students were low achievers. The reason they reported was the less interest and motivation of those students. However, both the teachers seem confused in suggesting the curative measures to address their de-motivation. Mostly, they expressed their satisfactions and considered no change desirable.

The Storming Stage of Teachers' Learning and Practice

As assumed and then explored, the teachers had hardly any reflective attitude and the idea of reflection was a new concept for the teachers. During the first session conducted to provide teachers with ideas on reflection, the participation of all the teachers remained absolutely passive and even what they shared were of insubstantial nature. At the end of the workshop, Ziauddin expressed his concern about the effectiveness of the workshop. He said that the workshop was not helpful in improving their reflectivity, as he termed it not practical. Sharifullah shared somewhat similar concerns about the effectiveness of the workshops. In the remaining sessions, the focus remained on making the concept of reflection clear and practical explaining the stages and sharing the guided questions.

Despite attending the sessions on reflection, there was no big difference in the teaching strategies of the teachers. During the classroom observation, it was found that while teaching any subject, the teachers focus only on reading, translation and vocabulary development. In the post observation discussion, Sharifullah was happy to tell that his lesson was successful as the students were able to tell the meaning of the new words. However, there were quite few students to tell the meaning of the new words while the rest remained passive throughout the lesson. Sharifullah expressed his concern of passive students but he could not reflect on the causes of their passivity. In contrast, he tries to retreat by saying that five students never did any task in the classroom and the other student has lack of confidence. This shows that the five off task students and the one, who is lacking confidence, are out of the circle of influence of the teachers. Likewise, Zahirullah helping students do the exercises asked some questions about Hazrat Usman Ghani (third caliph of Islam) to build on their prior knowledge and students responded to him.But later on, he asked them to copy the answers from the textbooks. I

[†]Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper instead of the real names of the participants

observed that either the students were copying what was in the book or making errors while writing the answers in their notebooks in their own words. Here, it was found that the teachers were not fully familiar with the aims of teaching different subjects. Since they did not have objectives for the lessons and no clear idea what to achieve, they had hardly any area to reflect on. In response to my question in the post observation discussion, Zahirullah commented that he taught and then he made the students write the answers to the questions. He believed that he achieved what he wanted to achieve.

On the other hand, their reflections on the lessons as emerged from post discussion or reflective journalswere simple description of what they had done in the respective classrooms. They neither identify the strengths and failures nor suggest any other strategies to teach the lessons differently. In short, the data revealed that the teacher had not developed proper understanding and attitude of reflective practice as they were repeating the same practices. One obvious reason of lesser improvement was the lack of proper understanding of the concept. It was anticipated that the literature would be hard for the teachers to understand but I did not foresee that it would be too difficult. Again, I thought that the teachers would read the literature and seek my help, if needed. However, they never consulted me in this regard. The participant teachers mentioned two reasons in relation to literature reading. First, for all the three teachers, the shortage of time was a real concern as they did not have time to read the literature. Second, the literature was difficult and beyond their understanding level.

As a strategic step, the researcher focused on critical questions during the post observation discussions which proved to be helpful in improving their understanding of reflective practice. Though easier in nature, such questions were really putting the teachers in hard thinking in the beginning.Ziauddin and Sharifullah expressed similar views that even it was confusing for them to pinpoint what would be the success of their lessons.

However, the researcher also realized that the progress of the teachers was quite lower than the expectations. Moreover, it was found that unless teachers have SMART objectives for their lessons, they will teach each lesson in the same way and there would be hardly any situation and incident to reflect upon. Therefore, it seemed viable and inevitable to help the teachers set appropriate objectives.This decision was made to help the teachers reflect how a curriculum informs the teacher set appropriate objectives of the lesson and what strategies facilitate the achievements of the objectives. Moreover, it was realized that unless some demonstrations are given in the classroom and sample reflections shared with the teachers, giving only theory might not work. Therefore, at this stage, the researcher took on the role of a co-planner and co-teacher. I held sessions with the teachers and discussed the appropriate objectives of the curriculum at hand and setting SMART objectives. We also discussed the appropriate strategies helpful in achieving the objectives of the lessons.

The Struggling Stage of Re-Conceptualization

The culture of taking teaching for granted, work force and their non-reflective attitude made the teachers reluctant in writing their lesson plans. However, on my repeated request they started writing short lesson plans and we discussed and modified them before going to class. On the other hand, I also remained involved in co-teaching with Sharifullah. We planned the lesson of a poem "Let me fly". The teacher asked me to teach the lesson, as he was not comfortable to teach the poem perhaps in my presence. I started teaching the lesson. In the beginning, I found the students reluctant to participate and to respond to the posed questions. The reasons as I envisaged were unfamiliarity with the process, the fear of making mistakes and errors and constant error correction by the teachers as the teacher attaches high importance to bookish sentences. I consistently encouraged them to speak and gradually the students came up with rhyming words and then they were asked to develop a poem of their own. The students came up with their own lines and I wrote their responses on the whiteboard. Thus, they developed a poem of their own.

Reflecting on my teaching, Sharifullahstarted praising the teaching strategy. For example, he said that it was interesting and useful. He further said that he never asked his students to write a poem of their own and he considered it very difficult for students. He said that to him only those who have had mastery over English could develop a poem. Now he believed that students too had the capabilities to develop poems.

Another interesting remarks he made, "Previously we were only focusing on four skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing but you did not focus on it". This remark depicts the teacher's long held belief rooted in his own schooling experiences that teaching the four language skills is superficial involvement in listening, reading, speaking and writing rather than using the strategies to deeper the skills. The fact is that by using whole language approach, I was also focusing on speaking and reading at the same times but the teacher's misconception made him think that I was not teaching language skills. An improvement in the level of his reflection has been observed but still the belief systems of the teacher has not been changed perhaps it was the struggling stage of re-conceptualization process. Observing me teaching another lesson, he reflected that I had involved students in work which was pleasing for him. "The difference I see", he remarked, "is that your role was of a facilitator and you helped students work by themselves". When I asked him what he learned from this experience, he bowed his head for some time and then said that the teacher should provide more and more opportunities of work to students instead of doing things by himself. This gradual change happened due to the questions asked from the teachers after a model lesson by the researcher. Thus, I found that teachers can better be helped in becoming reflective practitioners through helping them to reflect on classroom practices rather than conducting workshops on reflections.

In another lesson,Ziauddin distributed flash cards containing some new words such as information, purrs, granted, wonderful and humming. The students having the cards had first to guess the meanings of the words with the help of contextual clues in the sentences and also make sentences of their own. Ziauddin reflecting on his lesson showed his excitement as he thought the teaching went well and the students participated in the class. It was true that there was participation but few students were participating and even Ibrahim was dominating the whole class. When I drew his attention towards this issue, he constantly argued that Ibrahim is a sharp student and always taking a lead in the class. According to the teacher, all his classmates think that Ibrahim is a bright student in the class. Ziauddin became defensive and went on saying that as teacher he could not stop Ibrahim from participating in the classroom. I argued by saying that if your objective was to make Ibrahim speak more and more you achieved the objective very well but if you wanted to make maximum students take part in the lesson, then the objective was not fully achieved. On listening to this argument, he cooled down and started thinking. Next time, the teacher was sensitive to individual needs in the class and tried toprovide equal opportunity to all students.

While analyzing the reflective journals of the teachers, it was encouraging to note that gradually they had improved their reflectivity. Instead of just describing the events as in the initial stage, they were focusing on their achievements in the class. In one of the reflective comments, Ziauddin had concluded that teachers have to involve students in different activities as they have the abilities to perform what they are expected. Moreover, they were suggesting different activities instead of the one which they were used to in their classrooms.

DISCUSSION

This study brings forth some important insightswhich have implications both for academicians and practitioners. The study confirms that reflection or reflective practice is certainly an effective school based teacher learning model as it provides tremendous opportunities for teachers to improve their practices and, thus, grow professionally. However, the concept of reflection is confusing for teachers (Nikolou-Walker and Garnett, 2004) and as revealed in the current study, it takes time for the teachers to understand the process and to get used to the practice. Moreover, this process is highly influenced by teachers' perceptions and awareness about the importance and possibility of reflection in their professional growth. The teachers who did not involve in reflective practice were unable to appreciate that their professional capacity can be enhanced through workplace experiences. In this context, the participant teachers only attributed their personal and professional growth to academic and professional qualification. The teachers' lack of awareness regarding workplace and experiential learning shapes their perceptions of personal and professional growth. In this sense, teachers' perceptions of personal and professional growth and reflective practice are interdependent and go parallel. If teachers stayed tapped in unexamined assumptions, they are unlikely to appreciate reflective practice as a source of their professional growth (Larrivee, 2000).

In order to reexamine and reshape their assumptions and to get used to the reflective practice, teachers need a lot of support and facilitation. The study suggests that through challenging the practices and views of teachers, they could be provoked to think deeply and critically into their practices. It makes them deeply look into their practices and revisit their assumptions. Moreover, the quality of questions of the researcher (reflective coach) posed to teachers during post observation discussions determines the teachers' level of understanding of reflective practice. The question raised during post observation discussion were helpful for the teachers to be flexible and internalize that the way they teach is not the only way of teaching but there are alternatives. Such questions put the teachers in hard situation, which worked to deconstruct the long held beliefs of the teachers. Therefore, it can be argued that the more critical questions a researcher asks the more reflection level of the teachers improve. Hence, I came to the conclusion that though challenging and reasoning with the teachers sometimes poses a threat of de-motivation but also leads a teacher to revisit his/her own assumptions.

The study also suggests that there is a close link between setting smart objectives and the level of teachers' reflection. In the beginning both the teachers having difficulty in setting SMART objectives for their lesson also had difficulty in reflecting on their practices. The level of their reflection was as lower as the level of objectives they set for their lessons at hand. The superficial level of objectives of the lessons the teachers set for lessons limits the scope and level of their reflection. Therefore, the study suggests that the more the teachers are able to set appropriate and SMART objectives for the lessons the deeper they reflect on their practices.

The teachers need to be familiar and clear about the concept of reflection in order to put it into practice. Sharing literature is one of the strategies to enhance theoretical understanding of the teachers. Reed andKoliba (1995) argue that providing participants with relevant readings can stimulate their thinking about the issue. In order to develop the understanding of reflective notion and its importance, the teachers were provided with reading materials. However, the teachers did not properly benefit from literature in the study context as they had low competency in English and the literature being in English was difficult for their comprehension. I did not reflect on the difficult nature of literature and the level of teachers understanding. The teachers' reactions with regard to literature revealed to me very late as in the beginning they might have felt shy to mention that the literature was beyond their level of understanding. Otherwise, the strategic action would be intentionally altered and a discussion session on the literature would be the right alternative to help them understand the literature on reflection. It suggests that a researcher should consider the level of the participants and provide them with materials that are within their capacity to comprehend and benefit from.

The study revealed that teachers' workload has tremendous influence upon the nature of their reflective practice. The teachers involved in routine actions were found to be unable to capture and describe what did happen in the classroom. On the other hand, unless and until teachers have enough time to reflect on their practices, they may not be forced to practice it. The teachers were found to be busy with routine activities at school throughout the day which hardly enable them to spare time for reflection. In order to facilitate reflective practice, teachers not only need ongoing support but also flexible time schedule to sit together, discuss their issues and find workplace solutions for them.

The practices of reflective writing proved to be effective ways of improving teachers' reflective skills. While writing their reflective journals, the teachers went back to the successes and failures of their classroom practices and sometime pondered over the underlying causes. It shows that writing reflection was an opportunity for the teachers to revisit their instructional decisions of the day in the classroom which might not be possible in any other way. Another important aspect of reflective journal revealed from this reflection is that the teacher questions and critiques his own professional practices, which ultimately lead a teacher to better professional practice. Yet anotherfact surfaces from the above reflection is the feeling of excitement and the concern of the failure though superficial in terms of reflection yet important to motivate the teacher to work for more excitements and feelings of successes. Furthermore, reflective journals proved to be useful in terms of sharing reflections with others. For instance, Sharifullah said that he shared his reflective journals with his wife teaching in another school. Once his spouse had resentment with him for not sparing time for her but when he shared reflections with her she also got inspiration to reflect on her own practices. She was so inspired

that she sent one of her reflection to the researcher for feedback. Therefore, it can be argued that reflective journals help disseminate reflective practice to people in other institutions.

Although introducing the concept of reflection through action research was found to be an effective strategy for the professional development of those teachers who hardly avail any opportunity for their ongoing development, it was also revealed that this is a very challenging task to make teachers familiar with the concept and put the concept into practice. Though the researcher had entered the research context with some anticipated challenges but there were unanticipated challenges as well. For example, I had the assumption that my acquaintance with the research participants will make the research participants comfortable during the process of this action research. The analysis of the data, my own observations and, sometimes, the body language of the participants showed that the participants remained sensitive to my presence. Both the teachers mentioned that my presence in the classroom was developing a feeling of discomfort in them and they could not even teach the way they used to teach. My affiliation with PDCC‡, and my role as their language teacher and as a researcher developed this feeling of discomfort.

Yet another challenge I faced was the language barrier. For example, they themselves had language difficulty and this issue was influencing their teaching and reflection as well. Their low proficiency in English language was a hindrance in understanding the given literature and writing reflections. Though I allowed them to write reflections in Urdu as the purpose was to understand and practice reflection, they preferred writing in English as they wanted to improve their writing skill through this way. Similarly, another challenge I experienced in the context was non-availability of time for reflections. In the school they were fully engaged in teaching that is the reason, they could hardly spare time for me to discuss lesson planning and hold post observation conferences. This challenge remained unsolved throughout the process of the action research. Moreover, there were many other activities awaiting me at PDCC and thus, my own workload was also a big challenge in giving full time to the research participants. In order to sustain the process of reflection, further ongoing support to the teachers was very important which I could not continue due to my other activities. Moreover, I had decided to work with three teachers with the hope to better help them understand reflective practice. But during the research process, I realized that the wider and bigger the circle of reflective teachers the more there is possibility of professional conversation and reflective dialogue. Therefore, the limited numbers of teachers minimized the possibility of publicizing their reflections for others and learn from others experiences.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the perceptions and assumptions of teachers with regard to professional development influence the introduction and implementation of any teacher learning model in the workplace. The teachers who believe that professional development is possible only through external training, they might not easily be motivated to adopt any workplace teacher learning model. However, through working with teachers and showing the importance and possibility of workplace learning models, they could be motivated to benefit from such models. On the other hand, the quality of reflections also depends upon the professional background especially the pedagogical knowledge of teachers. Teachers' reflections could be critical and deeper if they have knowledge of a wide range of teaching alternatives. If the teachers are not familiar with teaching techniques and developing lesson plans, there is less possibility to reflect on their teaching. Most importantly, teachers should be familiar with the concept of SMART objectives in order to reflect on their practices vis-à-vis the objectives.

It shows that teachers need professional support from external sources in order to develop their capacity. Moreover, the reflective practice of teachers could be improved through asking critical questions which also necessitates the availability of reflective coach. The study also suggests that as compare to sharing literatures or theories, the reflective practices could be accelerated through supporting teachers in reflecting on real situations. Since the level of teachers in this context is low to

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understand and benefit from literature, while using this strategy, the level of teachers should be kept in mind. The literature must be in such language which is easy and comprehendible for teachers.

Anyhow, if workplace learning is suggested as an effective way of teacher learning, reflective practice is the best model of workplace learning. It certainly helps teachers improve their professional capacity. However, reflection is complex to understand and practice. Since it requires full commitment, hard work, enough time and ongoing support, it is very challenging to sustain the practices of reflection. Making reflection a compulsory component of teacher education institutions and extending ongoing support to teachers at the workplace could be helpful to make teachers benefit from this effective source of teacher learning.

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