

Supporting the Development of Reflective Dispositions for Professional Practice

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Introduction

My presentation delivers a brief outline of my doctoral research that posed the question; '*How Can I Support Early Childhood Studies Undergraduate Students to Develop Reflective Dispositions?*' (Hanson 2012). This paper offers some expansion upon some of the concepts I will present and uses extracts from my doctoral thesis (<http://hdl.handle.net/10036/3866>).

The research took place over a period of 4 years, including a Preparatory Pilot Project (PPP) that acted as a catalyst for a larger scale project based on the outcomes of the pilot. The students involved in the post pilot research were all level 4 (63, first year, new entrants) who started their studies at an English University in September 2009. The programme they were studying was a 3 year undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Studies. The majority of the students (approximately 80%) were progressing from level 3 studies, predominantly GCSE 'A' levels.

The findings of this research have been both enlightening and confirmatory; moreover, my own reflective journey has been a central part of this project and has enabled me to identify how my practice can be improved to enhance the development of a reflective culture within the Centre for Early Childhood in my institution.

The study took a Social Constructivist approach. My own beliefs regarding ontology lie in the notion that there is no one truth; that truth is multifaceted and are '*socially constructed multiple realities*' (Patton, 2002:134). This is what Denzin and Lincoln (2008:32) refer to as '*relativist ontology*'.

Reflective lenses of self, colleagues, students and literature have been used to create an understanding of the existing landscape of reflective practice within this particular context. Focus Group Discussion Forums (FGDF); reflective accounts; peer observation and Post-it Note response were all methods used to collect the data.

This research journey and the findings from the data of this project have enabled me to identify some key considerations when supporting the development of reflective dispositions within ECS students and in enabling a 'Reflective Community of Early Childhood Practice'.

The other significant finding from this inquiry is that of self-discovery and identifying that my own reflective limitations require consideration. My adaptation of Brookfield's (1995) four lens theory, which includes a new 'fifth dimension' that uses a 'peripheral socio-cultural lens' to widen and enrich the critical reflective process, has been created (Hanson 2012:143).

Contextualising this study

The move towards a graduate led, professionally qualified early years workforce is driven by the raft of Government initiatives that have been introduced over the past decade (Reed 2010). Some of these initiatives are determined by the incidents of failure to provide adequate support and care for some children and families who have unfortunately met with tragic ends (Laming Report 2003). Others are driven by the socio-political issues that encourage parents (mostly mothers), and those who are identified as 'unemployed employable' to return to work and contribute to the economy. However, regardless of the economic drivers, the overall aim of providing quality welfare and education for children and families is reliant upon a skilled workforce with the ability and motivation to reflect upon their experiences to act as agents of change.

As a result of years of research and campaigning, societal attitudes are now influencing policy. It was the Rumbold Report (Department for Education and Skills, 1990) that first identified the need for skilled graduates to lead practice; this was supported by the *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project* (EPPE) research (Sylva, et al., 2003). Sylva et al's research highlighted that the quality of the experiences and outcomes for children were directly influenced by the educational values and qualifications of the practitioners working with them. This was then formalised by the government in 2004 with the introduction of the '*Choice for parents, the best start for children: 10 year strategy for childcare*' (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2004), followed by the '*Raising Standards – Improving Outcomes: Statutory Guidance, Early Years Outcomes Duty, Child Care Act 2006*' (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2006). This is regarded as a pioneering piece of legislation as it is the first that exclusively focuses upon the Early Years and childcare. These initiatives have increased public recognition that a qualified Early Childhood

workforce is not only important but necessary to providing a quality provision for young children and their families.

The Early Years Workforce has to develop knowledge, skills and understanding in response to the changing policy landscape within the field, and identify where reflective practice sits within this landscape. Unlike working with a consistent, unchanging commodity, working with children, families and other professionals brings different challenges every day. The study of Early Childhood is about a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the child holistically and with this comes many complexities. Wood (2008:119) outlines how practitioners work in *'increasingly complex contexts* having to consider *'diverse communities and challenging, continually changing policy frameworks'*. This reflects Schön's (1987) work that emphasised the need for practitioners to reframe each unique experience and embed reflection within their practice.

Wood (2008) discusses the need for practitioners to be more than reflective and take on an activist role, this involves being active reflective researchers and able to generate knowledge and engage critically in their practice. This depth of involvement and commitment to the pursuit of quality provision and care will create continual questions and further challenges to solve, but this is an essential disposition to have as someone responsible for the health and education of young children. Similarly, Brookfield (1995:266) discusses the importance of practitioners being critically reflective and how lack of critical reflection in practice leads to apathy and assumptions that our work outside the practice setting *'serves no wider social purpose'*.

'Not to be reflective is to live in the present as a prisoner of the past. ...Not to be critically reflective is to be blown about by the winds of cultural and pedagogic preference'

(Brookfield 1995:265)

Theoretical and Methodological Framework for this study

My thinking has been informed by a variety of literature. However, there are some authors who provide the overall backdrop to my work and underpin the main themes running throughout the research. The main thread holding them all together is that of social constructivist theories and transformative education.

A range of authors have inspired me and have played an important part in supporting my thoughts and experiences. For instance, John Dewey's (1910; 1933) ideas about learning from and through experience (experiential learning) link closely with the social constructivist theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978); we are not passive recipients of knowledge but active agents in the construction of knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) discusses his ideas about learning being an active social process where knowledge develops through understanding our environments and interaction with others. Likewise Mezirow (1998) encourages using our life experiences to transform our understanding. Critically reflecting upon individuals' values, beliefs, principles and assumptions can enable a change in their frames of reference bringing about what both Mezirow (1998) and Freire (1973; 1970) view as an emancipatory affect. Enabling learners to develop through becoming critically conscious; challenging and undoing discriminatory beliefs and learning to become who and what they aspire to be which links with the theories of Schön (1987; 1995a). Schön's work takes the ideas of Dewey and bases the concept of learning through reflection within a professional context. Building on these concepts, Brookfield (1995) particularly supported my reflective development by introducing me to a strategy to enable a more critically reflective process. His four critical lenses theory that suggests we can make a more informed evaluation of our experiences by viewing them through different perspectives, helps to synthesise all of the previously mentioned ideas. The four lenses are the autobiographical lens, the theoretical/literature lens, colleagues/peers lens and students/pupils lens.

The methodological approach I used is aligned to the principles of my ontological and epistemological position and as such is sympathetic to the social context in which it is based. I adopted Marshall's (1999; 2010) definition of Action Research – '*Living Life as Inquiry*', because my personal and professional identities are intrinsically linked. My inquiring mind and genuine belief in the practice of reflection as a means to changing things for improvement mean that, like Marshall (1999:158) I '*treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut...It involves seeking to monitor how what I do relates to what I espouse*'. This genuine self-awareness has not happened overnight, but I am now better able to understand the importance of self-identity in the process of reflexivity, both as a teacher and a researcher. This Action Research approach to educational inquiry complements the reflective content and nature of this study.

The common goals between reflective practice and action research are change and improvement through active engagement with practice. Carr and Kemmis (1986:162) define action research as:

'...a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations where these practices are carried out.'

This Action Research inquiry was about the life experiences of ECS students with a focus on reflective practice, with the aim of improving both students' experiences and my own practice. McNiff and Whitehead (2009) refer to this process as transformational. The predominant criticism of qualitative practitioner based research is its subjective nature. McNiff (1988) contests this by explaining how the views of a variety of participants about the same issue make it 'inter-subjective' and if each participant agrees on the outcomes of the inquiry it results in objectivity. In the 1940s Kurt Lewin, an American psychologist, was widely accepted as the originator of the Action Research approach. He argued for the integration of theory and practice and that transformational change was more effective when research was conducted by those who were involved in the context rather than 'outsider' researchers. Involving ECS students in reflective practice, and using dialogue in a variety of contexts to nurture critical reflection, will enable them to become critically conscious of the political influences upon their practice.

Norton (2009:59) introduced me to the term 'Pedagogical Action Research' and states its purpose as:

'...to systematically investigate one's own teaching/learning facilitation practice, with the dual aim of improving that practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge in order to benefit student learning.'

Ethical approval was sought and given by my institution and all participants were informed explicitly about the intentions of the research, their involvement in it and what would happen to the data upon completion. Ethical issues are situated in experience of doing the research and cannot always be anticipated via ethical approval systems. Therefore doing ethical research is aligned with my own ethics of practice. I had to make decisions based upon my own professional judgements about how to act ethically within my practice as a researcher and a teacher. However, as a professional educator these judgements are based upon the guidance for educational researchers as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011).

I collected data through a number of methods. I used excerpts from my **reflective diary** and my continual reflective thoughts; transcripts from **focus group discussions** from both students and tutors; **peer observation** records of my lecturing, and '**post-it-note responses**' collected from students who participated in the original focus group discussions (one year later). These methods, together with a comprehensive literature search enabled me to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions and views of reflection.

Findings

I used content analysis to identify appropriate themes informed by the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The most feasible category of interpretive analysis method for my purpose was 'Grounded Theory'. As Ryan and Bernard (2000:785) state that, '*grounded theory is concerned with the discovery of data-induced hypotheses.*'

Grounded theorizing involves a process combining both inductive and deductive analysis. Patton (2002:453) explains that '*inductive analysis involves discovering patterns themes and categories in one's data*'. Corbin and Strauss (2008:326) state that:

'This method is inductive in the sense that findings are derived from data. It's deductive in the sense the concept and the linking statements are interpretative; that is, constructed by the analyst from data.'

The discussions within the FGFDs demonstrate that students are searching for a formulaic approach to their studies as they discuss whether they are 'doing it right'. Their discussions also demonstrate that they are receptive to accepting information, but are not able to apply the theoretical concepts without having the practical experience to accommodate and assimilate and make meaning from combining the theory and practice.

The main themes emerging from the data are:

- **Transitional needs of students coming from different educational experiences based predominantly on transmission approaches and needing to know the 'right answer'. This links to supporting an epistemological shift to a social constructivist perspective.**

- **Becoming professionally self-aware and developing a professional artistry; a confidence that comes from experience and knowledge. Becoming conscious of their influences as agents of change.**
- **Practical experience relating to theoretical knowledge – theory in, and from, practice.**
- **Opportunities for collaboration within a community of practice.**

One of the most significant findings of this research is how one's own reflective disposition and ability to reflect is instrumental in enabling the development of reflective dispositions and thinking within others. It was only within the last phase of this research project that I recognised how my own limitations in this area have restricted my view. Ironically, I fell into the trap that I warned against, the trap of using mechanistic, technicist strategies to reflect upon situations; Brookfield (1995) has been very influential in my thinking and actions, and I still believe that his four lenses theory has been the catalyst for my improved understanding of reflective practice. However, I now realise that although it provided me with more and wider perspectives upon the issues I was inquiring about, I was still predominantly using my own socio-cultural perspective and the immediate contextual landscape to make sense of the experiences. It seems appropriate here to relate back to my previous thoughts about my '*relativist ontological*' position (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008:32) being what King and Horrocks describe as understanding the world through '*our specific cultural and social frames of reference*' (2010:9).

I can now see that this relativist ontology can have limitations if the wider cultural and social frames of reference influencing the participants and the context of the research are not considered. I am not suggesting that my findings are invalid or will not be useful for future practice. On the contrary, my findings will enable me and colleagues to support ECS students in developing their understanding of reflective practice and develop reflective dispositions. However, I am suggesting that as reflective practitioners there are more than four perspectives to consider.

When we reflect upon a situation or experience it instantly becomes diffused by the socio cultural lens that is intrinsic to our being and the boundaries of our contextual surroundings. For instance, I had a discussion with a colleague about the problems that social networking, specifically Facebook, was causing for one of our fellow colleagues. She was being discussed within this public

forum by students in a derogatory way. This disappointed me as it bore no relationship to the values that the same students were displaying when regarding their professional practice, which were socially and professionally acceptable. It also made me realise that I was not considering the wider contextual elements of students' lives that have an influence on how they view the world and act within it.

I believe that it is important to be grounded in values and beliefs that guide all of our actions regardless of the context. If those values and beliefs allow others to be hurt, damaged and abused then we are looking at much more than a pedagogical cultural change for some students; it is a total cultural shift in behaviour to allow them to engage in a caring profession, and act respectfully to those they work with and for.

On the basis of this study I propose a further dimension to Brookfield's theory (1995). This dimension is the socio-cultural one that needs to be considered through a peripheral lens that supports a wider perspective and also filters the other lenses. It can illuminate reflective evaluations further, and is determined by two aspects – the socio-cultural influence of the person engaged in reflection, and the socio-cultural influences of the particular context in which the reflection takes place. In this particular case I believe that my minimal exposure to (and reluctance to engage with) the Facebook phenomenon has meant the perspective of the students has not been fully considered: I needed to use a wider angled lens (perspective) to consider how evolution has impacted upon the situation I am viewing.

The immediacy and lack of regard for privacy that social networking promotes must have an influence on students' reflective dispositions. In addition, if my research had been conducted in a different establishment, for example an early years setting, the political and socio-cultural influences of that setting would have given a different perspective. I raise these issues only to demonstrate the need to continuously review actions and assumptions through critical reflection. I have argued that this type of reflection is evolutionary in nature.

My reflection upon reflection has evolved throughout this particular journey and organically grown from the seeds I first planted when my inquiry began.

I conclude this paper with my definition of reflective practice

'Reflective practice is an active engagement in continual review and repositioning of assumptions, values and practice in light of evaluation of multiple perspectives, including the wider socio-cultural perspectives influencing the context; transforming and transcending self and practice in order to effect change and improvement.'
(Hanson 2012:143)

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