

A Reflection on Five Reflective Accounts

By Fred A. J. Korthagen

Introduction

Some ten years ago, the notions of reflection and reflective teaching became popular among teacher educators. In the 1980s, these terms obtained a central place in the literature on teaching and teacher education. Books and research articles emphasized teachers' competence to analyze their own practice and the factors influencing this practice. Now, a decade later, teacher educators are beginning to realize that what is true for teachers must be true for themselves as well. Suddenly, it is becoming generally accepted that teacher educators study their own practice. The American Educational Research Association Special Interest Group "Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices" (S-STEP), which was created in 1992, saw a rapid growth to more than 200 members, from all over the world, quickly becoming one of the largest special interest groups of the Association.

Or is it too optimistic to say that teacher educators' activities that have the character of inquiry into their own practice have become generally accepted? To

what degree do these activities contribute to these educators' status in academia? If one reads the accounts of some of the non-tenured teacher educators in this special issue, one may start to think the opposite is true...

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The Nature of Knowledge about Teaching

Underlying this issue is a basic and unresolved problem concerning the nature of educational knowledge. Recently, Fenstermacher (1994) outlined the unclear relationship between “formal” knowledge about teaching developed by means of traditional scientific research and the “practical” knowledge that is embedded in teachers’ everyday behavior. Gradually, more researchers have begun to emphasize the important role of the latter type of knowledge for teachers and the limitations of formal knowledge for practice. Among them are Elbaz (1983) and Connelly and Clandinin (1984), who use the notion of “images” to refer to a metaphorical type of knowledge that guides teacher behavior. Elbaz (1991) notes that teachers’ knowledge is nonlinear, holistic, imbued with personal meaning, and largely tacit. Connelly and Clandinin state that an image “draws both the past and the future into a personally meaningful nexus of experience focussed on the immediate situation that called it forth.” They believe that in teachers’ narratives the essence of their “personal practical knowledge” can be found.

Schön (1987) introduced the term “knowing-in-action” to indicate the type of practical knowledge imbedded in teachers’ actions. He regards what he calls the “technical rationality” view of teaching as a fundamental misconception. The term refers to the application of conventional social science to problems and tasks of everyday professional practice (Fenstermacher, 1994). As Shulman (1986) notes, teacher education programs in general seem to be based on the view that teacher candidates will teach effectively once they have acquired subject matter knowledge, become acquainted with models of innovative curriculum and instruction, and have practiced using them. Many studies show that in practice this “application model” fails (see, for example, Kagan, 1992). If teacher educators would reflect fully on what this means for their current practices, it could lead to a fundamental crisis in our thinking about teacher education (compare Johnson, 1987). However, most researchers in academia still try to interpret the gap between scientific knowledge about teaching on the one hand and teaching practice on the other in terms of the dominant paradigm: as a problem of promoting more effective application of existing knowledge (compare Berry & Dienes, 1993, p. 130).

For a long time, the academic world was not supportive of the position of creative researchers who tried to build on another epistemological basis. In this special issue are compiled the reflective accounts of five teacher educator/researchers who dared to carry out this difficult task in an area in which this is largely unprecedented: the world of teacher education practices. What makes their contributions so interesting is that these people are intimately familiar with two worlds: the world of scientific research on education **and** the world of practice. And they try to combine the best of both worlds.

To Change or Not to Change

At the same time, this implies that the authors of these contributions are not representative of the entire population of teacher educators. They themselves express that they feel different from their colleagues in their own universities, and even the four beginning teacher educators seem to be different from most beginning teacher educators: they are highly reflective, and resistant to socialization into established patterns. Moreover, they study their own processes of development and change.

These change processes are crucial in all five contributions. To be more concrete, change of beliefs is the issue, on two levels: the level of change of student teachers and the level of change in the teacher educators themselves. Or maybe it is more accurate to say that the central issue is the **struggle** with change, as almost every page reflects the difficulties these educators experienced?

Upon reading these papers, I began to realize just how strange this field of teacher education is. As teacher educators, we try to promote our students' developments, which is understating our effort to steer them into directions we consider important. At the same time, faculties try to change their new staff members, *i.e.*, the beginning teacher educators. The tenured staff's message seems to be that, to become a valuable faculty member, one should forget about trying to put too much time into teaching; instead, one should try to do research the way the veterans do research. I am happy to see how the four beginning teacher educators have resisted this pressure.

Why am I so happy about it? The answer is that I do not believe in change that is effected from outside a person. The best way to stop any change in a person is to try to impose it on him or her. This is the paradox of education, of the promotion of any kind of human growth: pressure toward change stops change (Korthagen, 1993).

We create this pressure in very subtle ways. Tom Russell's contribution shows an intriguing example: a preservice teacher talked to Tom about his observations of a lesson Tom gave. What did he do? He analyzed what Tom did **wrong**. "Of course he did," I would say, for that is the usual way we socialize student teachers. I agree with Tom when he wonders if we will ever overcome this method of discussion, characterized by "the observer criticizes; the teacher becomes defensive," and develop the ability to **listen** to each other.

Why have we grown so far away from looking where people are coming from, what **their** concerns are, what their reasons are for doing what they are doing, what their beliefs are, what their strengths are? It is exactly this discrepancy between the educator's perspective and the student teacher's perspective that has created and sustained the gap between theory and practice in teacher education.

My colleague Hans Créton's clear view on this subject has influenced me

A Reflection on Five Reflective Accounts

greatly. He says: "Ask yourself how you became who you are now in your work. Did you choose this career and become successful because people told you over and over again what you were doing wrong? Or was it maybe because you have often heard: 'Oh, you're good at that?'" We tend to believe in criticism as an instrument for change, but we forget that it rarely works very well.

The Five Contributions

This puts me in a peculiar position while responding to the papers in this special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Implicit in that task is the idea that I should discuss weaknesses in the contributions. I think these authors have already been put through the mill of criticism by "more experienced" colleagues. I prefer to highlight what I consider the strong points in their papers.

Primarily, each displays beautifully how knowledge about teaching develops in the interaction between the individual's hopes, ideals, and desires, on the one hand, and the feedback, or "backtalk," from the other participants in the concrete educational setting on the other. Each story also shows that knowledge created in this way is uniquely relevant for practice, in this case the practice of teacher education.

Karen Guilfoyle rightly places this issue in the center of her contribution. She has much to offer to teachers through her own difficult, often depressing, yet ultimately inspiring experiences as a teacher educator who constantly tries to construct meaning out of experience. A central question for further study arising from her work is: "What makes the difference?" What enables some practitioners to stay reflective and to keep on fighting for the improvement of education, while others do not? This is an issue we still know very little about.

In this respect, Mary Lynn Hamilton's notion of the cyclone in a person's professional development is very interesting. Every teacher experiences a personal cyclone when there is a change in the context, for example, when one leaves university to work in a school, or when one grows older and starts to perceive the students as cyclones. How can we genuinely support teachers in such periods? Should that not be a central focal point for both teacher educators and researchers, or better still, for those who try to integrate these functions?

Tom Russell is such a person. His strength, as I see it, lies in his insight into learning processes and the role of backtalk from the practical situation, and in his ability to organize learning processes so that backtalk and feedback are promoted. I found it very stimulating to read how an experienced teacher educator is continually able to create new stimuli for learning, for both his students and himself.

Peggy Placier teaches history of education and she is a living example of this herself in her description of a part of her own history as a teacher educator. Her paper reveals how much her personal history is embedded in the wider context of the American society. Is the United States grading system in fact compatible with the

idea of promoting students to become professional teachers? Does a process of becoming a teacher not require that the student teacher feel safe to come to the supervisor with the problems she encounters? Will she really bring up her most pressing problems if these can be used against her when the moment of assessment arrives? What are the influences of grading on students' learning processes? These must be controversial questions, not only to United States teacher education but to the entire educational system. Peggy has the courage to raise these questions.

Stefinee Pinnegar's strength lies in her attention for the characteristics of beginning. Unlike most research into differences between beginners and experts, Stefinee focusses on the **process** the beginner goes through and she is very aware of the relationship between affect and cognition in this process. The interesting paradox is that Stefinee makes a strong point by taking her own uncertainties and vulnerability seriously. She shows how notions like loneliness, lack of support, the code of the veterans, *etcetera*, all hamper the development the beginner is supposed to make. The translation Stefinee makes from this analysis to the way student teaching is often organized, is of fundamental importance to teacher educators.

The Professionalization of Teacher Educators

These five teacher educators have strongly supported and stimulated each other during their inquiries. In spite of geographical distance they were in close contact with each other by means of electronic mail. This is heartwarming, but it makes one wonder at the same time. How would they have persevered in their struggles without e-mail? What support do teacher educators, and especially beginning teacher educators, receive?

It is remarkable that in this area, where professional development is the operative word, there is an almost complete absence of any structured training or supervision of teacher educators, although some developments have been reported (Wilson, 1990). This was one major conclusion of a European survey into the professional development of teacher educators in the European Community, published in the 1990 issue of the *European Journal of Teacher Education* (Vol. 13, No. 1/2). It draws upon case studies carried out by members of the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE), on the basis of a recommendation by the European Ministers of Education, saying that "a systematic review at national and European levels should be made of the recruitment and training of teacher trainers."

Only in Austria has something like a formal induction program for teacher educators been instigated. Since 1993, there has been an international one-week professional course for teacher educators, given at my own university. From many different countries (especially African, but also European) we receive messages in which people complain about the lack of funding for participation in such a course.

We have learned a great deal about effective strategies and interventions for the promotion of student teachers' learning. We know methods for bridging the gap

A Reflection on Five Reflective Accounts

between theory and practice in teacher education, methods requiring special skills. Why would teacher educators all over the world have to solve their problems on their own or, at best, with their close colleagues? If teachers in schools were the issue here, we would regard this situation as utterly unprofessional (compare Wilson, 1990).

The Future of Research on Teacher Education

Even if we had established a system for the professional development of teacher education staff, we would still need researchers as a vanguard in the process of knowledge construction about teacher education. What can we learn from this *Teacher Education Quarterly* issue for future research aiming at the improvement of teacher education?

Conventional research on teaching, as published in most refereed journals, aims at understanding and explaining educational phenomena. Action research by teachers or teacher educators aims at the improvement of education. If I may accentuate this distinction somewhat, we might say that traditional research helps us realize that education is often bad and unsuccessful. Stefinee, Peggy, Tom, Mary Lynn, and Karen prefer to apply their time and energy to the improvement of education. I deliberately emphasize the polarity between both types of research, but my final objective is to bring them together. I strongly believe that both types of research are mutually dependent and that they should support each other.

First of all, this implies that conventional researchers should try harder to put their findings into practice. This entails more than a few sentences at the end of their publications under the heading "implications." They should put the implications of their theories to the test, which would undoubtedly help them to realize that practical situations are always unique and should be regarded in their specific context, making necessary a unique interpretation of the general theory. This interpretation is often more of a problem than the construction of the theory itself.

However, if we wish to build a bridge between the two types of research, we should also look at the opposite end of the bridge. Before we attempt to improve an educational setting, we also need to understand that unique situation. This is what the search of each of the authors of the five contributions was about. In their reports, they develop notions and ideas that may be at the very heart of this understanding. I would call them **critical issues**. They make it possible for action research aiming at the improvement of educational practices, and research aiming at the understanding of these practices, to go hand in hand. It is possible to build a bridge, and I think the critical issues developed by practitioners can serve as the foundations of that bridge. It is a difficult task, but an essential one. I would say that our journey has only just begun. In this special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, five pioneers show us a way forward.

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