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Can Reflective Teaching Improve Pre-Service Teachers' Reflectivity?

Shima Sharafi

English Department, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran

Seyed Jalal Abdolmanafi Rokni*

English Department, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran

* Corresponding author email: j.abdolmanafi@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to focus on reflection in teacher education at pre-service level and it proposes to provide a comprehensive analysis on the process of becoming reflective. Within this context, it sheds some light on the perceptions of pre-service teachers on becoming reflective practitioners, and it studies the content of their reflection in a qualitative research paradigm. The participants were 30 pre-service teachers in an undergraduate teacher education program of English language at Qaemshahr Islamic Azad University. An in-depth analysis was conducted on pre-service teachers' experiences and on their perceptions towards these experiences. Furthermore, the ways in which pre-service teachers improve their reflectivity were explored. The study revealed that there was a developmental process in pre-service teachers' reflectivity and they incorporated their theoretical background and considered contextual factors in reflecting on their experiences. While doing so, the emphasis was on 'reflection on action,' which entails reflection on the observed and lived experiences.

Keywords: *reflection, pre-service teacher, practicum "practical teaching", microteaching, peer feedback*

Introduction

Together with the interest towards reflection in teacher education, various programs have been put into practice aiming to help prospective teachers to reflect. In doing so, different models and frameworks, proposing to assist teacher educators in the design of reflective teacher education programs, were employed (Korthagen, 2004). These programs involved a number of components, such as journals (Spadling & Wilson, 2002), logbooks (Korthagen, 1999); portfolios (Foote, 2001), cases (LaBoskey, 1992), and action research (Zeichner & Liston, 1990). The following section, which benefits from several studies and reflective programs, elaborates on various components that encourage reflective thinking in novice teachers.

Reflective Writing

Drawing from the work of Bruner on thought and cognitive functioning, it is explained that narrative mode of thinking, which is context dependent, contributes to the understanding of the observed or experienced action, and to the construction of knowledge on teaching (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Taking this argument into consideration, reflective writing, which contains critical analysis and reasoning, has a narrative element in its nature. It focuses on the experience that is attached to its context, and reality is constructed considering the complexities of this environment.

With regard to this, Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993) confirm that reflection has three elements – cognitive, critical, and narrative. For example, while reflecting on her own narrative writing experiences, an elementary school teacher explains that regular narration enabled her to understand the complexities of classroom environment. Also, she explained that this reflective writing helped her develop her own understanding of teaching, and consequently, this guided her in the conceptualization of herself as a teacher (Akin, 2002).

Logs, storytelling, reports, portfolios, journals, and recently, electronic mails are narrative accounts that are used to promote reflection. Among them, reflective journals are accepted as an effective method that provides ongoing meaningful reflection (Ward & McCotter, 2004). They are generally viewed as an integral part of reflective teacher preparation programs (Langer, 2002).

Journals provide opportunity for an insider look where first-hand information is obtained on pre-service teachers' experiences. In relation to this, they help to hear voices of teachers (Tsang, 2003). Undoubtedly, this creates a valuable experience for both parties – the actor who reflects and the supervisor who reads – in that it forms a bridge of communication. In addition, journals enable both of these parties to witness the evolution of self-awareness that takes place through self-reflection (Tsang, 2003).

In journals, pre-service teachers are generally provided with guidelines, to help them reflect upon their experiences (Bain et al., 2002). These guidelines are mainly in the form of guiding questions helping pre-service teachers reflect on their field experiences. They aim to encourage them to have a journey within themselves to explore what they experience, how they value these experiences, and challenge these experiences by considering and assessing the grounds of their beliefs and knowledge. In addition to the guidelines, a relationship was found between writing about critical incidents (e.g., dilemmas) and critical reflection. It was stated that lower levels of reflection seemed to occur in journals where pre-service teachers wrote about daily events (Yost et al., 2000).

This verifies Dewey's (1910) conception of reflection, in which he stresses that in reflection there is genuine interest and a genuine problem to reflect upon. In relation to this, researchers pointed out that engaging pre-service teachers in problem-solving strategies increases their critical reflection (Yost et al., 2000). As mentioned above, besides journals, there are other methods that foster reflection in written form, such as memoir, portfolios, and online communication.

For example, one study focused on the use of e-mails in supporting reflection. In this study, it was found out that e-mails promoted experiential inquiry since they had monologic and dialogic qualities, and that they fostered cognitive and personal reflections on learning task. Furthermore, a study reported an inter-continental initiation to promote reflection. In this study, pre-service teachers in two different universities in two different continents (Australia and the US) were paired with overseas counterparts to reflect through e-mails, following the pre-assigned guidelines (Gibson et al., 2003). In addition, inquiry-based storytelling was found to be effective in encouraging teachers, since it combined their accumulated theory and practice in a deliberative mode of inquiry (LaBoskey & Cline, 2000).

Collaboration for Reflection

Communication has an integral role in reflective process. In this process which involves active self-evaluation, effective communication with equal peers and with colleagues, create a supportive interaction for professional growth (Glazer, Abbott, & Harris, 2004). Within this context, collaboration is regarded to be an important factor in enhancing reflective thinking. While collaborating, pre-service teachers work together and communicate with each other on their experiences (Kraft, 2002). It has interactive and reflective implications, as it entails cooperation and teamwork along with autonomy.

Collaboration is regarded as a complex task which requires mutual trust, openness, different sources of information, and experience (Lang, 2000). Similarly, Hill (2000) who exposed pre-service teachers into a collaborative interaction environment during their tutorial, in which they could link theory to practice and voice their opinions, states that this inquiry based atmosphere requires an "autonomy-supportive approach". While engaging in collaborative inquiry, through critical questioning and problem-posing, practitioners have an opportunity to become aware of the beliefs and assumptions that they have, and question the grounds of these assumptions. Consequently, this leads to transformation and reconstruction of knowledge and experiences (Miller, 1990).

Research indicated that critical friend dyads, in which pre-service teachers can collaborate, question, and challenge each other, contribute to the development of reflection in pre-service teacher education (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Drawing from Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), working together with competent friends is regarded as an effective strategy in maximizing growth (Yost et al., 2000). On another note, reflecting on a teacher education course that is based on principles of collaborative learning, it was mentioned that collaboration on shared experiences, readings, and questions created a sense of awareness of individuality and uniqueness among participants (Miller, 1990).

Research suggested ways to encourage collaborative inquiry. One of these strategies, proposed by Weiss and Weiss (2001), is videotaped reflective practice in which the peers view and reflect on selected excerpts. This allows collaborative analysis of teaching with peers and supervisor. In this study, the participants commented positively on the use of video, since it allowed them to have alternative perspectives.

Another study showed that collaborative inquiry, specifically, contributed to pre-service teachers' construction of their role in teaching and learning, and it helped them raise awareness and own their teaching and learning process (Kraft, 2002). A further form of collaboration is teamwork in which prospective teachers or practicing teachers work together as a team. It is reported that team work helps improve practice, and it creates mutual support, but requires team skills (Minnet, 2003). In her study, which focuses on team teaching in an inner-city school, she explains that working in a team created shared reflection that involved evaluation of own actions, access to alternative lenses, and engagement in reflective dialogues.

Collaborative inquiry is regarded as an important element for transformative learning. In doing so, teachers become aware of themselves – their assumptions, feelings, and perspectives – as they share experiences. This, then, results in transformation which may contribute to the construction of their role as teachers (Kraft, 2002). Supervision in the form of peer evaluation is regarded as an effective way of forming support communities in which pre-service teachers help each other improve their learning, and combine theory with practice (Valli, 1997).

The study of Hatton and Smith (1995) indicated that peer discussions of microteaching were effective in promoting reflection among prospective teachers. Likewise, the pre-service teachers in the study of Weiss and Weiss (2001) reported that they found supervised collaborative peer analysis effective, since it provided alternative perspectives to analyze own teaching. In another implementation, entitled PING, which was carried out in Germany; teachers of science education in lower secondary schools were involved in a mediated reflective collaboration electronic network (Lang, 2000). Within this system, reflective collaboration took place on issues such as development and revision of teaching materials and concepts, teacher training, and research and administrative changes. It was mentioned that as a result of this project, integrated and independent learning took place.

Guidance for Reflection

As pointed out by Dewey (1933), reflection is not a habitual process; rather, it is a learned process that requires encouragement, reinforcement, supervision and training. For example, instructor feedback is regarded to be one of the effective methods that foster reflection. A study that focused primarily on instructor feedback in journal entries revealed that feedback is crucial for improvement of reflection. Specifically, it was found out that feedback on reflection level had more impact on the improvement of pre-service teachers' reflection than the feedback that focused on the teaching issues. It was pointed out that in this type of feedback, pre-service teachers were challenged through questions and comments, and they were guided to consider alternative perspectives (Bain et al., 2002).

Furthermore, it is mentioned that indirect guidance is essential in reflective conferences. For example, in a study, it is mentioned that in pre- and post-microteaching conferences, the supervisor gave immense importance to avoid direct suggestions. So instead, he provided indirect suggestions, posed indirect questions and made recommendations on the basis of empirical research. In such conferences, it is explained that the discussion should focus first on the pre-service teachers' impressions on the experience, and then on the discussion of the lesson, considering its planning, theme, key ideas, instructional methods, and classroom management (Collier, 1999). As stated earlier, guidance on the use of journals is an important factor. As Brookfield (1995) emphasized, in many cases, there is a need to motivate pre-service teachers on the impact of journal keeping on their developmental process.

Improvement of Reflection

There is substantial research that focuses on the improvement in reflection, while putting an emphasis on its quality and on its developmental process. This form of inquiry is regarded to have a psychological orientation towards reflection, and it underlies the conceptual development and growth (Valli, 1997). In her study, Valli (1993) emphasizes that reflective quality is often indicated by 'theory-practice' relationship, and she explains that what counts as quality of reflection is the ability to make the relationship between theory and practice problematic.

It is now viewed that reflection is developmental in nature (Hatton & Smith, 1995). For example, in her studies, Pultorak (1996) observed improvement in pre-service teachers' reflections over a period of time, and she reached a conclusion that teacher reflectivity is a developmental process.

Similarly, the study conducted by Tsang (2003), who focused on six pre-service teachers of English as Second Language (TESL) for a period of 12 months, found that these pre-service teachers became more reflective towards the end of the course. Based on the results of this study, Tsang concluded that reflection of these pre-service teachers improved over time, and that journal writing played an important role in enhancing their reflection.

Similarly, the study conducted by Wenzlaff (1994) found that pre-service teachers showed a progress in their reflection both in journal entries and in supervisory conferences. That is to say, in journals, their level of reflection shifted from Van Manen's level technical to practical reflection, and in supervisory conferences, their level reached from level technical to critical reflection.

However, another study showed no substantial improvement in novice teachers' reflection, since they tended to reflect mostly at Zeichner and Liston's (1987) 'factual reflection' level (Bean & Stevens, 2002). Zeichner and Liston (1987) pointed out that, in their study, the pre-service teachers' conceptual level affected the way they engaged in reflective discourse. That is to say, if their conceptual level was high, they reflected at a higher level during the supervisory conferences. This indicates a strong interrelationship between prospective teachers' conception of teaching and the way they reflect.

Research Question

Do pre-service teachers improve their reflection?

How do pre-service teachers improve their reflection?

Methodology

Participants

The course participants consisted of undergraduate pre-service teachers who were in their final year of their bachelor's program of ELT. The total number of the course participants who participated in this study was 30. They were between 23-31 years old. Twenty three of the participants were females and the rest (7) were males. Except for two of the participants, who were from Tehran and Semnan, the majority of them (28) were from Mazandaran. In this course, the participants formed two seminar groups on a random basis, group 1 which gathered on Wednesday evenings, and group 2 that met on Thursday mornings.

Instrumentation

A perception questionnaire was administered in order to obtain the participants' views on the process of this reflective practicum course. Two sets of perception questionnaires were conducted: the mid-course and end-of-course perception questionnaires. The mid-course questionnaire contained seven open-ended questions aiming to seek the pre-service teachers' feedback namely on: discussion questions, cases, working in groups in class, and their role and course instructor's role in the class. End-of-course perception questionnaire consisting of eleven open-ended questions also aimed to obtain pre-service teachers' overall views on the course. It intended to seek the pre-service teachers' perception on the components and on the implementation of the course.

Data Analysis

In this study, the major data analysis procedure was content analysis of the qualitative research paradigm. In addition to this, as a part of the evaluative nature of the study, a reflection framework was utilized in order to evaluate the extent to which pre-service teachers improved their reflection in the course. Thus, as a minor procedure, the qualitative data were quantified and represented in frequency.

Results

Guidance in Reflection

Guidance appeared to have an integral role in this reflective practicum course. The pre-service teachers emphasized the direct feedback that they received from the course instructor and from peers, and they viewed these feedbacks as being constructive. Guidance that was received throughout the course process was valued, and it was viewed that it contributed to self-development. For example, one pre-service teacher focused particularly on the influence of instructor feedback on their self-development. Another one explained that she took this feedback into consideration while teaching. This pre-service teacher believes that feedback is useful for

her, saying "... because if I don't receive any feedback, I will not be able to see my strengths and weaknesses and I will not be able to teach effectively". Hence, as she stressed, guidance increased her self-awareness.

In relation to feedback, the pre-service teachers focused mainly on overcoming their weaknesses. It was emphasized by one of the pre-service teachers that through the guidance from the instructor and from their peers, he had an opportunity to identify his weaknesses; therefore, he improved his teaching. Another important element is the easiness that was felt while receiving guidance and feedback. The pre-service teachers found the giving and receiving feedback process non-threatening where they could get guidance without being offended. This is true both for the guidance from the instructor and from peers.

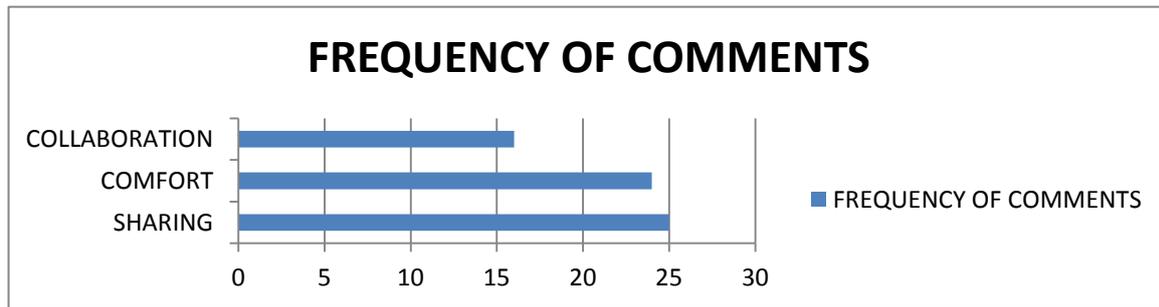
Furthermore, it was mentioned that the course instructor had an important role in giving and receiving feedback in a nonthreatening manner. There was openness towards feedback and development, and this was attributed to the non-threatening atmosphere of the class. For example, one pre-service teacher drew attention to the open-mindedness of her peers and their reaction to peer feedback, and she regarded this as a prerequisite for giving and receiving feedback. She said "You need to have open minded students to make good discussions in the class". She pointed out the essentiality of harmony among group members for effective peer feedback and guidance and s/he viewed this as an important ingredient for such a process.

Overall, it was expressed by the pre-service teachers that guidance through constructive feedback had an important role in this course, and it was provided both by the course instructor and by the peers in a collaborative manner. Within this context, the pre-service teachers were open and responsible while giving and receiving feedback. In this process, they accepted guidance wholeheartedly, in a mature manner underlining that feedback helped them raise their awareness towards their teaching and develop themselves professionally. It was stated that the friendly and relaxed atmosphere of the class helped them actualize a smooth practice of feedback exchange, in which they did not feel inhibited. It also created motivating atmosphere where everyone participated, and where they collaborated genuinely to help each other for self-development.

Class Atmosphere

Throughout the analysis, it was noticed that the pre-service teachers commented extensively on the instructional environment generated among them in different settings, such as in class discussions, observations, and in microteachings. Their comments on different aspects of the issue are presented below. Table 1 represents the number of comments offered by the students on each thematic topic discussed in the following paragraphs.

Figure1: Number of comments according to each theme



-SHARING: It was highly emphasized and appreciated by the pre-service teachers that they shared their experiences and exchanged ideas during class discussions. In this interactive process, they shared ideas freely, without being under pressure. Furthermore, they stated that this interactive atmosphere exposed them to multiple perspectives of different peers. For example, one of the pre-service teachers expressed that through class discussions she found opportunities to hear different experiences of her friends and to exchange ideas on how to overcome some of the problems they observed.

-COMFORT: Similar to their feelings for guidance, the pre-service teachers elaborated on how comfortable they felt in seminars. They expressed that they felt **relaxed** in discussions, and in their relationship with each other and with the course instructor. For example, one of them expressed her appreciation about the relaxed atmosphere of the class where she could share her ideas freely. In addition, she underlined that she felt motivated to participate in interaction which in return contributed to her self-development. Furthermore, she emphasized that this uninhibited class atmosphere helped her improve her self-expression. In relation to this, it was viewed that there was harmony among the course participants which created a team spirit while working, and which altogether contributed to having a comfortable class atmosphere. This atmosphere which was free from pressure helped the pre-service teachers to express themselves, which contributed to their self-confidence. In fact, it was stated that in this interactive atmosphere, they could share their experiences and felt more encouraged, which motivated them to express themselves confidently. Furthermore, the course atmosphere was found to be unconventional, explaining that the pre-service teachers could interact in an untraditional and friendly atmosphere. It was indicated that this atmosphere motivated them and marked that this course was different from the other courses, saying "I have never felt that this course is like the other lessons that we have to go into the lesson, sit there and listen to the teacher and then, go home".

-COLLABORATION: Collaboration was viewed as being central to this course. When asked how they preferred to work in class, almost all the pre-service teachers preferred to work with friends since they could communicate and share ideas in a better way. Especially, one of them viewed that cooperative work suited the nature of the course as it did not focus solely on theory but required communication. It was stated that while collaborating, they supported each other. It was explained that working with a peer helped them cooperate and share their observations and impressions about the lessons they observed. In relation to support, the pre-service teachers noted that they felt more confident when they worked with a peer, and therefore, they felt better about themselves. It was stated that working together with a peer in microteaching increased their confidence because they felt that they are supported by their peer. In addition, collaboration was perceived to be enjoyable, as they

could interact and share their feelings. For example, one pre-service teacher viewed that it was fun to work in pairs, because s/he would enjoy observations together with his/her friends and get support from each other. To summarize, the collaborative and supporting atmosphere of the class was regarded to be an integral part of this course. There was trust for each other which made it easier for the pre-service teachers to work together in harmony and to create a collaborative atmosphere. This collaborative atmosphere enabled them to feel self-confident since they communicated their ideas and experiences and supported each other without feeling shy or limited. In this interactive atmosphere, they could voice their unique perspectives, and therefore, express their individuality and autonomy on different issues.

Suggestions on Improvement of Course

The pre-service teachers made suggestions for the improvement of this reflective course. These suggestions were centered around increasing the amount of authentic experiences, specifically on microteaching. This indicated that they were pleased with the microteaching process, and the components related to microteaching, saying "Generally, everything was sufficient but as I mentioned...there may be more micro-teachings recorded to video that the candidates have the chance to evaluate themselves".

Also, in relation to the complaints on working with a partner during microteaching, suggestions were made on working individually during microteaching so that more autonomy could be gained. In addition, one of the pre-service teachers suggested that this course should be extended to one academic year rather than one semester so that they could digest the process more effectively and benefit from it at utmost level. So the extension of duration of the course was a further suggestion.

Overall, the pre-service teachers made constructive criticism about the things that concerned them in the course. It should be noted that they were aware of how they felt about certain implementations, and why they felt this way so that they could explain the reason behind their uneasiness. On the whole, it is evident that they had positive views about the course. However, they made their concerns and criticisms clear so that these criticisms can be taken into consideration in order to improve this course. It is apparent that some of the pre-service teachers felt that their autonomy was restricted during microteaching.

It is true that the fact that the only time they had for teaching was shared with another peer created frustration in some pre-service teachers. Thus, taking their suggestions into account, alterations need to be done accordingly. Overall, this course was viewed to have exposed pre-service teachers to interesting authentic experiences, in which they improved their theoretical knowledge and integrated it in their practical experiences. They received guidance which they believed to contribute to their cognitive and professional development. Furthermore, they were active throughout the course process, since they shared and exchanged ideas and collaborated in a comfortable atmosphere. All these helped them become aware of their potentials and their uniqueness and this enabled them to take a further step toward the construction of their identity as a teacher.

Discussion

While interpreting and elaborating on the findings, in relation to the perceptions on a reflective practicum course certain principles that cut across these concerns in reflection emerged. In other words, the findings on the pre-

service teachers' perceptions generated a further dimension of factors that were found to be important for reflection in pre-service teacher education. These aspects that were derived from the findings were organized into the following major themes: collaboration, guidance, self-awareness and construction of professional identity.

- **COLLABORATION:** Collaboration is vital ingredient for reflective courses and collaborative nature of this study was crucial aspect of this course. In this collaborative atmosphere the pre-service teachers could reflect on their experiences, give feedback to each other and improve themselves. While collaborating each other they felt self-confident since they could share responsibility and develop their teaching.

- **GUIDANCE:** it was found to be an integral component of this reflective practicum course. Guidance in this study was constructive since it improved their self-awareness toward themselves as a teacher and helped them to overcome their weaknesses. Dewey (1933) stated that vital characteristics of reflective practitioner are: whole-heartedness and responsibility, based on pre-service teachers' comments on peer feedback and instructor feedback indicated that they were receptive for guidance and they welcome it with the positive attitude.

- **SELF-AWARENESS AND CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY:** Throughout this reflective practicum course, self-awareness was regarded to be one of the vital qualities promoted. It was emphasized by the pre-service teachers that they developed awareness towards their own actions as well as towards others' actions, through microteaching assignments and peer feedback. It was underlined that understanding own progress in teaching and in self-articulation were important achievements.

The aim of teacher education was viewed as helping pre-service teachers to question their actions. In regard to this, the role of teacher educators was described as enabling novices to realize what they know and to make their tacit knowledge explicit (Yost et al., 2000). Zeichner and Liston (1987) highlighted that self-awareness is an important element in becoming a reflective teacher. They explain that in the process of self-awareness, pre-service teachers become aware of themselves as teachers and of their environments, which consequently, lead to transformation in perception towards teaching.

Similarly, Freese's (1999) study revealed that the novice teachers became better at evaluating teaching situations and at understanding their experiences better, which helped them prepare for their future profession. In relation to self-awareness, the findings of this study revealed that throughout the course, the pre-service teachers touched upon the fact that the reflection process enabled them to think about their teaching styles, self-discover their preferences in teaching, realize their uniqueness, and develop their own self-image as teachers. Hence, the promotion of reflectivity enabled them to discover themselves as teachers, and it triggered the process of construction of self-image, which is part of self-growth.

Helping novice teachers to question their practice by considering their beliefs, values, and assumptions through giving them voice and ownership of their learning process are underlying principles of critical self-reflection (Kraft, 2002). Through reflection, novice teachers are empowered to make sense of their own experiences, judge, and make choices following value commitments using their knowledge and intuitions/practical wisdom. However, although in the course, the pre-service teachers made it explicit that they became more self-aware in

the process of the course their analysis of their own teaching was not found to be at a high level. That is to say, the reflection on their own teaching was mainly limited to personal judgments without much theoretical or contextual support.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In an era where reflection in teacher education is regarded as an effective approach to teacher education, this study provides a closer and comprehensive analysis on the phenomenon of reflection in pre-service EFL teacher education. Within this process, it places primary importance on the understanding of reflective practicum "Practical Teaching" process from the pre-service teachers' perspectives, by inquiring their perceptions and interests during a reflective practicum "Practical Teaching" process.

This provides alternative lenses to the viewpoints of researchers, teacher educators, and of experienced teachers. Consequently, it enriches our understanding of the phenomenon of reflection and of the reflective process as a whole. In addition, this study conducts a detailed analysis on the developmental process of pre-service teachers' reflective thinking. Within this process, it sheds light upon how various methods contribute to the developmental process. In addition, it elaborates upon how pre-service teachers improved their reflectivity considering their focuses of attention in the practicum process.

Hence, this analytic approach will contribute further to our understanding on the developmental process of reflective thinking in novice teachers. In relation to these, the findings of this study allows course instructors and curriculum designers in teacher education to design courses and programs accordingly, and to assist pre-service teachers to get a good start in their practice. This study empowers the pre-service teachers, since it provides an opportunity for them to be heard.

In return, for teacher educators, it creates a bridge into the world of novice teachers, helping them understand their concerns, dilemmas, and feelings in their practicum "Practical Teaching" process. Inevitably, at a contextual level, the findings of this study will contribute to the development of a more effective reflective practicum course, as well as assisting the development of a reflective teacher education program. Taking into consideration the underlying principles of action research in qualitative research paradigm, this research contains an empowering process. Hence, this study stands to be an example for other practitioners in the field of teacher education for the betterment of their practice.

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