



PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH REFLECTIVE JOURNALING

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ABSTRACT

Educators learn through reflection on how power shapes their own practices. By expressing their concerns about the constraints they face and brainstorming solutions or remedies to address them, educators grow as professionals. The primary goal for using reflective journals in this research was to make graduate students critically reflect on how issues of globalization and diversity affect their own school practices. Understanding these issues, empower educators to develop an inclusive environment for all students. Students were asked to examine how social, political, cultural, and economic factors impact school practices and students' learning. Participating students' journals demonstrated evidence of higher levels of critical reflection and increased awareness of students' diversity at the end of the course. Findings indicated an improvement in students' attitudes towards reflective writing as well.

Educators need to know how to create inclusive schools that prepare students for a global society. Holloway and Gouthro (2011) argued that educators, even those who work in primarily white schools, should be cognizant that their students will graduate to work in diverse societies. They found that challenging educators to think of global issues beyond their personal and local experiences help them address diversity issues more positively. The students in this study were all educators in schools where the majority of students are Whites who come from rural communities.

The purpose of the course was to make doctoral students of education leadership critically reflect on issues of social justice related to globalization and diversity. They were expected to consider how these issues affect their own practices and how they can improve education through an in-depth understanding of the issues and develop an inclusive environment for all students. Doctoral students were asked to read texts that focused on global social justice issues and examine how social and cultural factors specifically impact students' learning and education in general. The reflective journals were analyzed to determine if students were able to examine the issues critically and appreciate their long-term implications for students' learning.

A reflective journal is a useful tool to enhance educators' practices and professional development. Novice and experienced teachers can create and adjust their teaching philosophies and practices through reflection on how abstract theories manifest themselves in real life (Gallego, 2014). Fostering and improving reflective journaling can be achieved through the use of structured questions, supervised scaffolding, shared experiences, and opportunities to connect theory to practice (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Lee, 2008; Pultorak, 1996; Zeki, 2010).



Literature Review

Holloway and Gouthro stated that,

Developing the capacity to read, work with, and understand critical theories provides students with the ability to continuously learn and to question their understandings of the world. Novice educators come to see the familiar in unfamiliar ways, brought anew through a process of questioning their own worldviews and what was previously assumed as truth. It is only once power systems are acknowledged and critiqued as social constructs that it is then possible to suggest alternative models that may challenge the norm around effective teaching practices. (2005, p. 35)

Reflective journals range from open, free flowing style to structured format. Open journals offer the writers the flexibility to choose topics they want to discuss, explore new ideas, discuss their feelings, and start a dialogue with the instructor freely. In structured journals, the instructor chooses the topic for reflection, directs students' thinking to help them sharpen their analytical skills as they reflect on a situation or a text (Cohen-Sayag&Fisch, 2012).

The author used semi-structured journals for this study. The students were to reflect on a set of readings focused on a specific topic such as inequality in schools or teachers' preparation in developing countries. The specific topic usually correlated with the theme of the weekly readings, videos, guest presentations, and class discussions. The students had the freedom to reflect on the issue from their own perspectives or relate it to their own practices.

Classification of Reflective Journals

With the widespread use of reflective journals in education, many researchers examined their effects on teachers' growth and students' learning. Others dedicated their work to studying reflections' nature and type, while others devised ways to classify them into different degrees or levels. Many of these classifications maintain that reflections can be organized in a hierarchy ranging from summary or descriptive to critical in nature.

Van Manen was one of the first educators to develop a categorization of reflections in 1977, which have been used by educators to classify teachers' reflections. He ranked teachers' journals into three levels:

- a. Technical Rationality, in which the reflective practitioner focuses on classroom management and competency as measured by outcomes;
- b. Practical Action, in which the reflective practitioner tries to clarify the assumptions that underlie pedagogical practices and assess the consequences of such practices; and
- c. Critical Reflection, in which moral and ethical concerns are considered as the reflective practitioners develop curricula and decide on educational practices.

Hatton and Smith (1995) described four degrees of reflection. These levels are:



- a. Descriptive Writing in which the writer only gives a descriptive recount of a situation or a text.,
- b. Descriptive Writing in which the writer describes the situation or text through personal reflection or perspective,
- c. Dialogue Reflection in which the writer explore the factors that resulted in a specific situation, and
- d. Critical Reflection, in which the writer considers different causes for a situation while considering the social, political, and historical factors that may have impacted the situation.

More recently, Lee (2005) offered three levels of reflection:

- a. Recall level in which the writer interpret a situation in terms of his/her own personal experience,
- b. Rationalization level in which the writer explores and analyze possible reasons for behaviors and students, and
- c. Reflective level, in which the writer analyze the underlying reasons for such behavior and establish or suggest steps for improvement in the future.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the works of Karl Marx, Michael Foucault, Edward Said, and Paulo Freire, the author uses a critical theory approach to empower learners to critically analyze and evaluate the complex impact of globalization and diversity on their educational practices. The author employs critical readings and discussion questions focused on issues of global social justice as tools to help students examine the dominant modes of thinking, which dictate their educational practices. By employing these tools (readings, discussions, and structured questions), students were able to fully understand the impact of school practices on students' learning and growth. Such understanding enables them to take measures to address school inequalities and create an inclusive environment for all students. The use of discussions and journals to increase students' social awareness is supported by Giroux as he pointed out that, "For it is in language that human beings are inscribed and give form to those modes of address that constitute their sense of the political, ethical, economic, and social" (2005, p. 11).

Method

The author examined the effects of purposeful readings and semi-structured reflections on increasing awareness of graduate educational leadership students of the factors that impact students' learning. A global social justice theme was chosen for a doctoral comparative education course. Changes in students' reflections on issues such as poverty, gender inequality, cultural beliefs, and educational policies, and how these factors impact students' learning in a global context were recorded.

The participants were three groups of doctoral educational leadership students (totaling 40) enrolled in a comparative education course over a three-year period at a university in the



Southern United States. All students either held administrative or teaching positions in public schools, the state department of education, or higher education institutes.

Students were asked to read texts focusing on issues of global social justice and examine how these factors impact students' learning and school practices. The students were to read assigned chapters ahead of class and come prepared with responses to weekly structured questions. The questions were posted on the course website ahead of class meetings. After class, the students were to reflect on the readings and class discussions as they relate to their educational practices in a journal to be e-mailed to the instructor at the end of each week.

A content analysis method of the students' weekly journals was used to determine if the students changed the level of their reflections as a result of their participation in the course. The author used a three-level hierarchy to classify students' journals:

1. Descriptive; in which the writer only gives a descriptive recount/summary of a discussion, presentation or a text,
2. Analytical; in which the writer analyzes the text, discussion, or presentation in light of a personal experience or a perspective, and
3. Critical; in which the writer considers the social, political, and historical factors that may have impacted the situation covered in the reading or discussion.

To analyze the data, the author highlighted texts from each journal indicating different levels of reflections. Each paragraph was assigned a reflection level based on the above classification. Each journal was given a score based on the average score for all paragraphs in the journal. Graphs were drawn to determine if individual students' journals demonstrated a change in their level of reflection after they participated in course activities.

Results

Results demonstrated a majority of students started their journals at the beginning of the course mainly focusing on describing/summarizing the issues discussed in the readings and the class. Through structured questions and class discussions, students were encouraged to take an in-depth look at issues expressed in the readings. Students were prodded to examine how global concerns may impact their own practices even though it may appear, at first, unrelated or inapplicable to their own context.

The following paragraph is an example of a student's reflection at the descriptive level. The student summarizes a video watched in class about teacher training in Finland without adding any analysis of the content and its implications.

In a comparative type [way], we as American can certainly look to other countries for best practices for training teachers for the classroom. Finland for example, trains teachers in a very different but effective way. There seems to be more time spent working with potential teachers in actual classroom settings. Teachers in training are required to spend a substantial amount of time practice teaching.



In the following paragraph, the student draws a direct comparison between the American and Chinese school systems after a guest speaker's presentation. The student neither analyzes the content nor explores the implications of schools' structures. This paragraph is classified as descriptive.

One very interesting similarity between the American[s] and Chinese system is the fact that both systems have a twelve-year program for elementary and secondary education. The divisions among the two are somewhat different but the overall number of years [are] the same. The Chinese system seems to have a three level tier, while the American education system generally has three to four, sometimes five tiers. The Chinese system has a very similar public structure as well.

In the following paragraph, another student analytically reflects on the same guest's presentation but she links it to the increased emphasis on standardized tests in America and to the readings. The student analyzes similarities between the two systems and questions the effects of such practices on children.

This system of education in China places great emphasis on preparing for standardized examinations that are required by the government for advancement within the system of education but there is a price to be paid for this type of system. The pressure to pass tests to allow for upward mobility has placed tremendous pressure to succeed on children, often leading to despair, depression and suicide (Zhao, 2009). . . . As the United States moves into more emphasis on testing, I have to wonder if our children will mirror these negative traits due to pressures they feel to succeed. I also think that the emphasis on passing tests somehow robs children of a part of getting to be a child.

Similarly, in the following paragraph, a student remembers an earlier experience analyzing it in light of course discussion and presentations. The student states he never stopped to think of these children and their lives beyond that brief encounter many years ago but class discussions made him reflect on his previous lack of awareness and the role he can play in the future as an educational leader.

That experience was over twenty years ago, but our speaker this week brought that memory back to the surface. I wonder how many of the children that I gave water to that day have survived. I wonder how their lives have [been] shaped? I wonder what the young women and young men have had to do to survive? I wondered then, and still do, how such a place can exist alongside such an enormous city with so many resources. Why is it that I was not aware that such places existed-out of sight, out of mind? An even bigger question, as a future leader in education, is how we can make a difference in such despairing worlds. In my mind, education for social justice is critical.

The following paragraph exemplifies critical reflection, in which the student discusses factors that shape school practices and explores a possible solution to the problem.



That is a true sentiment and even seeks to answer another question that [was posed] last night, “why do some things work for different countries and not ours?” Everything boils down to the culture, ideology, and governance of a country as to if progress can occur and to what depth. . . the difference in the U.S. and other countries are their priorities and once those values are in place then change can truly begin. I believe that other countries are more tightly woven in thought and deed than the U.S and we tend to be flip-[floppy] with no real direction. Finland, Japan, and Germany are great examples of countries that are excelling and it is due to their alignment of government, ideology, and culture. The expectations are in place, resources provided, structure steady and concrete in design of goal and objective, and then the execution of [the] desired goal takes place.

In the following critical reflection, the student discusses the impact of social and financial considerations on higher education and warns of the consequences of ignoring the university’s mission.

To summarize, the specific value of addressing these issues in comparative literature is to increase awareness about some of the universities’ stances on some of these responses. The review of comparative literature indicates an all [too]familiar submissive response from post-secondary groups and an acceptance of new initiatives that may not necessarily be in the best interest of the population that the university serves. This increasingly accepted norm among post secondary establishments has reduced the amount of time spent on finding alternative measures to serve their group. If universities lose sight of their ability to develop and offer alternative programs, universities will see their standards and expectations of excellence disappear over time. This assumed submissive role of the part of schools will eliminate opportunities for academic freedom and the autonomy that once existed within each educational program on campus will be a thing of the past.

Discussion

The findings indicated that a significant number of students have reflected at the first level at the beginning of the course but a large percentage of them have progressed to a higher classification by the end of the course. Few students remained in the first level of reflection by the end of the course.

Insert Figure 1 here

However, at the beginning, students expressed frustration with the readings failing to see the connection between the context and their daily practices. This frustration was reported in Holloway and Gouthro’s (2011) research of undergraduate and graduate reflective writing. They attributed this resistance to the rarity of students’ exposure to critical theory and the use of serious analysis of sensitive issues such as discrimination, racism, etc. This rationale was supported in the current study. Students commented they were never exposed to critical readings and were rarely



asked to examine the long-term impact of their own practices and students' learning. Many students commented they never considered global issues and how they impact their own schools or saw the similarities between practices in other parts of the world and their communities.

Resistance to Critical Reflection

The author had a long experience with utilizing reflective journals in undergraduate and graduate education courses and detected that students are usually resistant to reflective practices. Holloway and Gouthro's (2011) found similar resistance. They reported, "In our teaching we have found that resistance comes in many forms; apathetic or sullen response; unfinished readings; superficial revisions to written reflections; dominant students; silent students; reductive summaries of theory; unwillingness to interpret and apply theory to new situations" (2011, p.30).

Holloway and Gouthro (2011) contended that students resist critical reflection because it entails painful self exploration and academic learning. They also argued that students "... find it demoralizing to realize the extent of the barriers that educators must address to teach from an emancipatory framework" (p. 31). The students in this study confirmed this assertion by stating that they did not like examining their own practices because they found themselves critical of their own behaviors.

The students pointed out that they did not like "... feeling like they have failed the students." However, many of them stated that they got accustomed to the practice of reflection and appreciated its value towards the end of the course. One student stated, "I started to think how can I improve my own teaching now that I am aware that what I'm doing is not enough." Another student commented, "When I started writing these journals, I used to sit in front of the computer for hours trying to come up with something 'intelligent' to fill two pages. I hated it. ... Now, I find myself thinking of all the things I can write about in my weekly journal." A different student stated, "I now automatically reflect on things I did and brainstorm how can I do it better next time. Wow!"

It behooves us as teacher educators then to take the time to foster the habit of reflective practices by utilizing reflective journals in our classes at the undergraduate and graduate levels. We should also dedicate the time in our classes to discuss students' thoughts in order for them to appreciate the value of reflection. It takes time and effort to nurture reflection in our students. Holloway and Gouthro (2011) argued that, "Developing the capacity for critical thinking and reflection involves time and patience as well as diligent efforts to engage with abstract theoretical writing that many learners find difficult" (p. 31). The results of this study lend support to their contention and highlight the value of fostering reflective practices in education courses.

One student wrote in his journal that he had settled on his dissertation research topic, but going through the class made him observe and analyze not only the Latino students' behaviors in his school, but also the Latino population in the community. He commented that he started to make mental notes of the interactions between the Latino population and the community. He began to think of ways these Latino students are marginalized in the school and his community at-large. Eventually, he decided to conduct his dissertation research on the implementation and evaluation of a school-wide program to better integrate Latino students in all aspects of school.



As educators, we should not give up or despair at the first sign of students' resistance to reflection. We should be aware of the need to be patient and persistent in our efforts to establish this practice in our classes.

Significance of Findings

In a global world, educators must gain an in-depth understanding of the different cultures and the impact global market and diversity has on education. Educators need to know how to create inclusive schools that prepare students for a global society. The need to understand how issues such as colonization, discrimination, wars, power struggles, etc. have influenced students' identities and may impact their ability to learn and prosper in our educational systems.

Giroux (2005) argued that. “. . . critical educators must give more thought to how the experience of marginality at the level of everyday life lends itself productively to forms of oppositional and transformative consciousness” (p. 25). Reflective journaling enhances educators' understanding of factors impacting their practices, raises their awareness regarding their own biases and beliefs, increases their sensitivity to students' needs, and establishes links between theory and practice (Genc, 2010).

An appropriate focus on educators' experiences and relating them to dominant schools of thought and practices is essential for developing their reflective practices. Loughran (2002) contended that structured teaching activities help teachers focus their thinking and promote reflective practices.

It is important to note though that improved reflective practices do not always translate into improved educational behaviors. However, in most cases, structured reflections lead to improved teaching and learning (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Loughran, 2002; Saleh, 2006). Therefore, we have to promote reflective teaching practices in all of our education courses.

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Figure 1 Examples of Individual Students' Progress of Reflective Journals



