

High school teachers' perceptions on reflective practice in teaching at one selected school in Khomas region, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of high school teachers' perceptions on reflective practice in teaching at one selected school in the Khomas region. A qualitative approach was used in this study and fourteen teachers were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Three types of data tools were used to gather information, namely; the lesson observation schedule, the interview schedule and an open-ended questionnaire. The data from the questionnaire was thematically analysed. The views of the teachers on reflective practice were transcribed, analysed, and presented in the descriptive form and the data from classroom observations? The findings revealed that most teachers at the selected school were familiar with the concept of reflective practice and they used reflective journaling and reflective supervision.

Based on the study findings, it can be concluded that the teachers had different views on reflective practice in teaching. The majority indicated that reflective practice is a crucial component of teaching and learning and should be incorporated in daily teaching, while few teachers were of the opinion that reflective practice takes time away from valuable teaching time and as such, it should not be a component of the teaching process. It is recommended that further studies are needed to get a broader view of teachers' perceptions in Namibia on reflective practice.

1. BACKGROUND INTRODUCTION

After independence in 1990, the government of the Republic of Namibia, through the Ministry of Education engaged in the process of improving the quality of education in Namibia. According to a research study carried out on the quality of education in Namibia by Shaningwa (2005), the quality of education has been a major concern in Namibia since independence in 1990. Teacher education was considered one of the most important areas of educational reform at independence. It played a very important role in the teachers' strategic role in the reform efforts. Fullan (1991) holds the view that educational



change depends on what teachers do and think. One of the best ways by which teachers may consistently monitor and improve their ability to teach effectively is through self-reflection on teaching (Clift; Houston and Pach, 1990; Evans, 2002).

Self-reflection is much like the process of orienting, where an individual uses both a map and a compass to navigate through unfamiliar territory. Educators equipped with learning theories and pedagogy, are asked to manoeuvre through ever changing circumstances of the classroom in terms of learners' behaviour, teaching strategies, curricular changes, and successfully execute teaching. Professional reflectivity aids in the reorientation of cognitive, behavioural and affective responses to the contextual demands of teaching (Schon, 1996). This is further supported by Dewey (1910) who defined reflective practice as persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends.

The reflective educator is able to take note of his/her surroundings, and hone-in on alternative pathways to reach a desirable destination (Ferraro, 2000). Hence, in responding to the teacher factors that influences the performance of learners at their final year examinations, this study aimed to answer the following research objectives:

1. Investigate the views of teachers at the selected school on reflective practice in teaching.
2. Examine the application of reflective practice in teaching (by teachers) at the selected school.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The performance of Grade 10 learners in the final year examinations is a major concern nationally and in particular at this selected school in the Khomas region. This is because each year the number of learners who pass the junior secondary final year examinations is increasingly declining (Sasman, 2008). As practitioners, we are confronted with the question of what is causing this decline in the performance of Grade 10 learners? Is it because of the complexity of the recent examinations or is it because of a lack of reflectivity on planning and presentation of lessons by teachers. These are some of the questions asked by the educators. Answering these questions require a holistic investigation into the different factors that influence the performance of learners. Shaningwa, (2005) suggests that the teacher's ability to engage in self-reflection effectively is one of the factors that may directly or indirectly influence the teaching-learning interaction in the classroom which later on affects the performance of learners at the final year examinations. Therefore, this study investigated teachers' views and perceptions on reflective practice.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective practice is located within the theory of constructivism (Falk, 1996). Constructivism is basically a theory based on observation and scientific study about how people learn (Bruner, 1996). It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When people encounter something new, they have to reconcile it with their previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what they believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, people are active creators of their own knowledge. To do this, they must ask questions, explore, and assess what they know.

In the classroom, the constructivist view of learning can point towards a number of different teaching practices. In the most general sense, it usually means encouraging learners to use active techniques (experiments, real-world problem solving) to create more knowledge and then to reflect on and talk about what they have done and how their understanding have changed. The teacher makes sure she or he understands the learners' pre-existing conceptions, and guides the activity to address them and then build on them.

Constructivist teachers encourage learners to constantly assess how the activity is helping them to gain understanding. By questioning themselves and their strategies, learners in the constructivist classroom ideally become "expert learners." This gives them ever-broadening tools to keep learning. With a well-planned classroom environment, the learners learn how to learn. Reflective practice is an element of constructivism because it is aimed at using information gathered through previous experience in order to enhance current and future practice (Swarts, 1998).

According to Swarts (1998), reflective practice has become a standard concept in teachers' education programmes. One of the models of conducting reflective practice is the collaborative model of reflective practices in which a colleague may pair up with another colleague with the purpose of enriching personal efficiency of their work and provide suggestions on how to refine their teaching practices (Syrjala, 1996 & Bookfield, 1995). Reflective practice can be defined as a response to past experience(s) and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience(s) as a basis for evaluation, decision-making, planning and acting (Syrjala, 1996).

3.1 Models of reflective practice

The collaborative model of reflective practice

Under the collaborative model of reflective practice, two colleagues are supposed to engage in observation of each other's ways of conducting duties (teaching) with the ultimate purpose of identifying and improving weaknesses in their teaching (Bookfield, 1995). This allows the two professionals (teachers) to critically look at each other's ways



of teaching and analyse their teaching with the purpose of improving efficacy (Syrjala, 1996).

Lawrence Stenhouse's model of reflective practice

This model refers to the process of reflective teaching and provides a dynamic basis for teacher actions. Teachers should act as researchers of their own practice and should develop the curriculum through practical enquiry (Stenhouse, 1975). Teachers are principally expected to plan, to make provisions and to act. Reflective teachers also need to monitor, observe and collect data on their own and the learners' intentions, actions and feelings. This evidence needs to be critically analysed and evaluated so that it can be shared, judgments made and decisions taken (Stenhouse, 1975; Kolb, 1984 & Dewey, 1933).

3.2 Levels of reflective practice

There are three levels of reflectivity namely; technical rationality, practical plan and critical reflection. Technical rationality is the lowest and simplest level of reflective practice and needs to be understood before applying the next level of reflective practice (practical plan)

(<http://orgonstate.edu/instruct/ed555/zone1/reflect.htm.9/9/2008.11:23>).

Practical plan is the intermediate level of applying reflective practice. At this level, the teacher analyses, plans and organises the implementation of the lesson plan to see how the objectives of the lesson are met

(<http://orgonstate.edu/instruct/ed555/zone1/reflect.htm.9/9/2008.11:23>).

Critical reflection is the highest and most complex level of reflection because it requires high order thinking in terms of effective implementation of the lesson. It goes deeper and broader - outside the individual - and may focus on such things as commitment to social justice (<http://orgonstate.edu/instruct/ed555/zone1/reflect.htm.9/9/2008.11:23>).

In summary, the two models of reflective practice relating to this study are as follows; *The collaborative model of reflective practice* and *Lawrence Stenhouse's model of reflective practice*. Under the collaborative model of reflective practice, two colleagues are supposed to engage in observation of each other's ways of conducting duties (teaching) with the ultimate purpose of identifying and improving weaknesses in their teaching. *Lawrence Stenhouse's model of reflective practice* refers to the process of reflective teaching and provides a dynamic basis for teacher actions. Teachers should act as researchers of their own practice and should develop the curriculum through practical enquiry (Stenhouse, 1975). Teachers are principally expected to plan, to make provisions and to act.

The two models of reflective practice mentioned above were used as follows; with collaborative model of reflective practice, the researcher collaborated with the participating teacher in the process of observing and scrutinizing the lesson presentation

with the overall intent of diagnosing discrepancies in the presentation of the lesson and providing alternative solutions to such discrepancies. The Lawrence Stenhouse's model of reflective practice was applied when the participants (teachers) were asked to go and do self-introspection in terms of their daily teaching practice.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative method of enquiry into research. In particular, the study used a case study of one selected school in the Khomas region. The population of the study was forty three (43) teachers and purposeful sampling procedures were used to select a sample of fourteen (14) teachers who taught from Grade 8 to Grade 12 using the following criteria: having more than 10 years of teaching experience; having teaching qualifications; and willingness to participate in the study. The researcher included teachers from grade 8 to grade 12 in order to get a broader picture of the views of teachers on reflective practice and to get a comprehensive depiction of the application of reflective practice at the selected school.

The participants were given an open-ended questionnaire to elicit responses about their views on reflective practice in teaching. The researcher conducted classroom observations with each of the fourteen participants in order to have primary data on the application of reflection in teaching at that selected school. At the end of each lesson observation, an interview was held with each participant in order to clarify issues that were not clear to the researcher. The data collected were analysed by classifying and categorizing themes that emerged from the data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The views of teachers were transcribed and interpreted in a descriptive form. Triangulation of the information generated through the three research tools used in the study was done in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the information obtained through the three research tools used to collect the data for this study.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Views of teachers on the importance of reflective practice in teaching.

The researchers assessed the participants' basic understanding about the importance of reflective practice by asking them a series of questions in the questionnaire. One of the questions asked participants whether or not they understood the concept of reflective practice.

Interestingly, ten out of fourteen teachers indicated that they have understood the concept reflective teaching practice. Teachers, who indicated that they understood the concept of reflective practice, gave a variety of definitions. The most important point



evident in the definitions given referred to the core of reflective practice which is: Reflective practice can be defined as a response to past experience(s) and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience(s) as a basis for evaluation, decision-making, planning and acting (Syrjala, 1996). Here are some of the definitions given by the participants:

“Reflective practice is all about evaluating your work to see if what you taught was well understood.”

It is all about confirming whether what was taught was understood and to see if the objectives were obtained.”

“It is all about self evaluation and evaluation of learners’ progress in the subject.”

“It is about checking the success or failure in teaching in order to know how to improve the situation in future.”

As can be seen from the definitions provided, the participants demonstrated understanding that reflective practice was about evaluating the situation at hand with the ultimate intent of making improvements to the prevailing situation.

When asked to indicate their views on the statement: *A reflective teacher is one who observes and reflects on his or her own teaching, and uses observations and reflection as a way of bringing about change in his or her teaching and learning*; all the fourteen teachers agreed with the statement. Ten strongly agreed while four just agreed. Ideally, this means that the teachers understood that reflective practice is an integral aspect of teaching. A successful reflective teacher should be able to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses in the lesson presentation in order to find alternative ways to overcome the weaknesses and to be able to keep up with the strengths of his/her lesson presentation. Based on this evidence, the researchers concluded that the understanding of teachers about the reflective practice might depend on their teaching experiences.

The participants were also asked to indicate some of the ways in which they usually made time to reflect on their teaching (think and re-think about their teaching). Teachers indicated that they used learners’ responses during lessons to determine the extent to which they have successfully managed to reach the desired objectives in their particular lessons.

Eight teachers indicated that they engaged in self-reflection at the end of each lesson, they looked at their weaknesses and strengths and then they worked out strategies to overcome their weaknesses. It seems that, relying on the results of learners as a way of self-reflection may not be the best way to engage in self-reflection for the following reasons: it might be too late to wait until the end of year or end of term’s results to determine one’s weaknesses in order to impact change in teaching. The second reason is that results obtained by a learner at the end of the year or end of the term may be influenced by many other factors, not necessarily related to the teacher’s ability to teach.

One of the participants responded as follows on the questionnaire *“I do not do self-reflection because it is time consuming, I am only concerned about finishing the syllabi”*. The researchers followed up on this statement by asking this particular participant about his views on the aspect of rushing to merely finish the syllabi as opposed to accomplishing

the objectives of the syllabi. Accomplishing the objectives of the syllabi, according to the researchers might entail finding better ways to enhance content delivery, to investigate ways of reaching out to all learners, to successfully facilitate learning. This particular participant simply insisted that there was not enough time for reflecting on teaching. He further questioned “*which of the two situations is better, to focus on reflection and trying new strategies in teaching so that you are eventually unable to finish the syllabi or to teach without reflections and finish the syllabi*”. It is important to note that finishing the syllabi may not mean anything if learning did not take place.

The researchers further investigated the views of the teachers about why they thought it was important to do self-reflection in teaching. A variety of answers were given, which included; “*to improve results through correcting mistakes discovered after reflections are done, to keep learning because a good teacher never stops learning, to be better teachers, to determine the extent to which the lesson objectives are being achieved and finally for professional development*”. This clearly shows that the teachers (including those who do not do self-reflection) were aware of the benefits of self-reflection in teaching.

5.2 Findings and discussions based on the lesson observations

In order to determine the application of reflective practice in teaching at the selected school, the researchers included indicators of reflectivity in the lesson observation schedule. The lesson observation schedule was used to check the aspects of reflective practice that needed to be demonstrated during teaching. In order to have the overall idea about the application of reflective teaching at the selected school, one of the researchers observed lesson presentations in the classes of the fourteen participants. A lesson observation schedule was used as a tool to gather data about the application of reflective practice in teaching.

The introductory phase of the lesson

When teachers apply reflective practice in their teaching, the following attributes of reflectivity are inevitable. Such attributes include: a proper introduction of the topic; followed by an adequate statement of objectives; continuous observations of learner’s activities during lesson presentation and ultimately, a brief reflection on the topic discussed in class to conclude the lessons. During the lesson observation period, it was noticed that only eight teachers out of fourteen teachers at the selected school introduced the objectives of the lesson at the beginning of the lesson. In the classes where objectives were stated, the objectives were well stated and seemed to appeal to the thinking level of learners. The stated objectives were realistic; hence they were accomplished during the time allocated to the specific period. The researcher also observed that about six teachers out of fourteen did not introduce the objectives of the lesson; they rather jumped into the presentation of the lesson and proceeded with the lesson to the end. The researcher argued that such teachers did not prepare well for their lesson in advance. The researcher further argued that this occurrence could have resulted



from the lack of knowledge in that self -reflection on lesson objectives form the basis of reflective teaching.

The presentation phase of the lesson

In this phase the teacher was expected to clarify the content of the topic so that eventually the objectives of the lesson are realized. Learners should understand the content of the lesson during this phase. The observations highlighted that some teachers incorporated learning aids into their teaching in order to facilitate understanding of the topic by learners. The creative use of the chalk board and how the teachers switched from illustrating simple drawings on the chalk board to displaying complex drawings on the overhead projector (OHP) were noted. In some classes however, teachers did not use any extra learning aids. The chalkboard was solely used in teaching the entire period. According to Swarts, (1998) a reflective teacher should be creative and inventive. He/she should be able to create an environment where learners construct their understanding under his/her guidance. The learners should be more engaged in learning and the teacher should facilitate the process, hence the concept of learner centered approach. Learner centered approach to teaching is an integral aspect of reflective teaching (Swarts, 1998).

During lesson presentation, it was very important to logically present the content of the lesson to the learners. Learning had to take place sequentially. Learning sequence might be defined as a step by step process by which learning took place during lesson presentation (Darling-Hamond & Bransford, 2005). The content of the lesson should have horizontal and vertical dimensions. According to MEC, (1998) horizontal dimension refers to the interconnection or the connectivism within the different subjects in a school curriculum, while the vertical dimension refers to the depth of content covered by the teacher in a specific topic of a particular subject.

It was discovered that in some classes (especially in the classes where the objectives of the lesson were not stated), the teachers treated their lessons as a separate entity from other subjects and even as a separate entity from other topics in the same subject. This was mainly evident in the fact that the teachers did not make any effort to link the topic either to the previous topic done in class or to other subjects done by the learners. Such tendencies in teaching may lead to fragmented learning; fragmented learning may result in inadequate comprehension and ultimately lead to poor performance in certain subjects at the final examinations (Shaningwa, 2005 & Larrivee, 2008). Five out of the fourteen participants observed did not relate their new lesson to the previous lessons or to any other subject. This might have created gaps in the learners' knowledge because a lack of continuity (connectivism) in learning may hamper the comprehension of learners in a particular subject. The other nine participants linked their new lessons to previous lessons and to a certain extent four teachers connected the topic of the day to other subjects done by the learners. Generally, teachers mainly related their new lesson to the previous lessons by asking questions based on the previous day's topic then creatively introduced the new topic in the process. In other words, teachers used learners' prior knowledge as a starting point towards teaching what may be un-known by the learners.

As the data collected revealed, 71% of the teachers thought they were applying reflective practice in teaching; however, the researchers felt that they lacked proper knowledge on how to apply reflective practice in teaching. This could be the same reason that accounts for the absence of reflective practice in the classrooms of four teachers observed, who indicated that they were not familiar with reflective practice.

Conclusive phase of the lesson

The conclusive phase of the lesson is the last phase in lesson presentation. At this phase, the teacher seeks to consolidate all aspects of the lesson in order to foster a universal understanding of the lesson. From the observations made during data collection, this area of lesson presentation was of a major concern. About five out of fourteen teachers did not make provisions for opportunities for learners to summarise the lesson. When learners are not given opportunities to reflect on the topic taught, the teacher may assume that there are no misconceptions or confusion in learners. A reflective teacher would therefore, constantly make time to allow learners to participate in class and at the end of the lesson and should make provision to ask learners to summarise the content of the lesson for the particular day (Swartz, 1998 & Schon, 1996).

When learners are given a chance to summarise the content of the lesson, a reflective teacher will carefully listen to the responses of learners and use the information as a basis of reflection on the extent to which the presentation was successful. The researcher therefore, would explain the lack of opportunities by learners for summarizing lesson content in certain classes observed was a result of lack of understanding on the importance of allowing learners to do a summary of the topic learned in every lesson.

5.3 Findings and discussions based on the interviews

What do you think reflective practice is all about?

A variety of answers such as; “*reflective practice is all about evaluating your work to see if what you taught was well understood*”, “*it is all about confirming whether what was taught was understood and to see if the objectives were obtained*”, were given.

One of the views provided by one of the participants reads as follows: “*reflective practice is about looking back at your teaching practice in order to try and identify areas which need improvement and work on them*”. This is in line with what was stated by Stenhouse (1975) who said that, teachers should act as researchers of their own practice and should develop the curriculum through practical enquiry.

The need to introduce reflective practice in all teacher training programs

The second question on the interview schedule asked the participants to state whether or not it was necessary to introduce reflective practice in all teachers training programs.



Thirteen teachers indicated that it was very important to include reflective practice in all teacher training programs. They argued that, without the knowledge of reflective practice, teachers would not be able to find out their deficiencies in teaching and as such, they would not be able to improve their quality of teaching. The participants further suggested that the knowledge of reflective practice would help teachers to better understand how to apply reflective practice appropriately in teaching.

One participant out of fourteen held a different view about the inclusion of reflective practice in teacher training programs. This individual was quoted as saying *“reflective practice is not so important. It does not have to be included in the teacher training program because it will divert attention of the teachers away from teaching, which is the key aspect of the teaching profession”*. This participant was more concerned about teaching to finish the syllabi without really minding the quality of teaching taking place.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, it can be concluded that the teachers held different views on reflective practice and its application in the teaching. Though the majority of the participants indicated to be aware of reflective practice, there was a lack of understanding in terms of applying the process of reflective practice in teaching. It can also be concluded that in as much as the teachers were trying to do reflections about teaching and learning, there were deficiencies in the skills and knowledge about the application of effective reflective practice as was reflected in the self-completion questionnaire, where participants were asked about models of reflective practice and where teachers were asked how do they think teachers should actively engage in reflective teaching.

In view of the study findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were made: The Faculty of Education of the University of Namibia should consider introducing or emphasizing the inclusion of reflective practice in all the teacher training programs. At school level, School Principals and management should introduce compulsory reflection of lesson presentation once every week by using the collaborative method of reflective practice.

Similar studies should be done at regional and national levels in Namibia in order to have a broader view of the perception of teachers in Namibia on reflective practice.

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