



Looking Again at “Surface-Level” Reflections

Framing a Competence View of Early Teacher Thinking

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Developmental Frameworks and Reflective Practice

Thirty years ago, Schön (1983) described practitioner reflection as a process of framing and reframing problems, creating reflective conversations with oneself and with others, taking actions to change one’s practice, and evaluating the consequences of those changes. Like many teacher educators, we teach and model reflection on teaching practices, and we observe a range of ways that our teacher candidates engage in the reflection process. Yet a consistent finding in the research on teacher reflection is that higher levels of reflection are rarely observed among teacher candidates (Klein, 2008; Larrivee, 2006; Lee, 2005; Mena-Marcos, García-Rodríguez, & Tillema, 2013; Pedro, 2005; Shoffner, 2008; Ward & McCotter, 2004) or practicing teachers (Belvis, Pineda, Armengol, & Moreno, 2013). For example, teacher candidates may remain focused on themselves, pondering the demands of the profession and of taking on new responsibilities:

How much am I going to put into this job/student teaching? The job/student teaching

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extends outside the classroom and the regular hours, and the question is where I’m going to draw the line. How far outside of regular hours? (J. S., January 31, 2012)

Other candidates may react with frustration to issues that have multiple layers, such as how assessment practices interact with perceptions of student ability: “I feel like it is so unfair to have a test with six long story problems when many students can’t read very well” (A. H., March 5, 2013).

Preservice teachers face a dizzying array of questions, practical issues, and new responsibilities as they learn to acclimate to the intensity of a complex profession. How can we validate candidate efforts to reflect on practice and support candidates to grow in their capacities to reflect? How can we understand a wide range of teacher reflection practices, especially those that do not appear to exhibit much depth?

As we examine and engage the literature on teacher reflection, we note a focus on naming different kinds of reflection, often in a sequence or continuum. For example, Larrivee (2006) described a continuum of reflection, noting that teachers can reflect at different levels simultaneously. At a *nonreflective* level, the teacher focuses on one explanation or solution. *Surface reflection* involves posing questions about strategies that maintain an efficient classroom, for example, “how can I limit transition time?” *Pedagogical reflection* focuses on questioning assumptions and biases and posing questions about theory, beliefs, and actions in the classroom, for example, “should I use reading groups?” In *critical reflection*, the teacher poses questions about the ethical and social equality implications of classroom practices, for example, “is my classroom promoting a sense of agency and freedom in all of my students?”

Although Larrivee suggested that teachers can reflect at different levels continuously, throughout the literature, we see models that describe “low levels” and “high levels” of reflection. In Figure 1, we contrast four theories that describe levels of reflective thinking and then note patterns among these models for reflection.

As we consider these models for reflection, we note several consistencies: All the models describe low and high levels of reflection and equate low levels of reflection with narrative or descriptive accounts, lack of questioning, and a focus on the self; alternatively, the highest levels of reflection are associated with abstraction, a critical stance, and engaging multiple perspectives. One concern we bring to these patterns is that framing reflection as low level or high level, while describing a trajectory of growth, can also contribute to deficit perspectives about the developing capacities of teacher candidates. Likewise, Clarà (2015) warned about conceptualizing reflection prescriptively as a series of steps, highlighting that reflection is a “descriptive notion” that refers to “spontaneous, common, real thinking” (p. 270).

Like Clarà (2015), Shoffner (2008), and Pedro (2005), we are interested in supporting relevant and meaningful reflection grounded in where candidates are in their unique growth trajectories as teachers. Clarà (2015), for example, described the practice of reflection as transforming “an incoherent situation into a coherent one” (p. 263) and as creating a “continuous interaction between inference and observation” (p. 265). He argued that prescriptive views of reflection too often imply

that “student teachers do not reflect as they should” (p. 269), and he suggested that the act of questioning—any question—can be critical in establishing or initiating a conversation between “the subject and the situation” (p. 270). From this perspective, teacher educators must aim to observe, value, and engage the actual, rather than idealized, reflection practices of beginning teachers and to support them in using such reflections to create meaning, coherence, and growth.

In this article, we seek to gain greater appreciation for the kinds of thinking and reflection that teacher candidates actually do. We look at reflections of teacher candidates that are typically categorized as descriptive, routine, or technical and seek to identify if and how “low levels” of reflection in fact serve a relevant purpose for teacher growth and development. We seek additional ways to understand what are typically labeled as “surface-level” reflections.

Figure 1
Four Theories of Reflective Thinking

Lee (2005) describes three intertwined levels of reflective thinking:			
<i>recall level</i> describing one’s experiences	<i>rationalization level</i> identifying relationships across experiences and acknowledging the complexity of teaching	<i>reflectivity level</i> suggesting alternative approaches to teaching	
Larivee (2006) describes a continuum of reflection, noting that teachers can reflect at different levels simultaneously:			
<i>non-reflective</i> describing one explanation or solution	<i>surface reflection</i> posing questions about strategies that maintain an efficient classroom	<i>pedagogical reflection</i> questioning assumptions and biases and posing questions about theory, beliefs, and actions in the classroom	<i>critical reflection</i> posing questions about the ethical and social equality implications of classroom practices
Ward & McCotter (2004) designed a rubric to evaluate levels of reflection and found that pre-service teachers rarely reflect at the transformative reflection level:			
<i>routine reflection</i> focus on self-centered concerns, questions are not posed	<i>technical reflection</i> describing or asking questions about specific teaching tasks	<i>dialogic reflection</i> engaging in an inquiry cycle of considering questions actions, and others’ perspectives	<i>transformative reflection</i> poses questions focused on pedagogical, ethical, moral, cultural, or historical concerns
Mena-Marcos, Garcia-Rodriguez, & Tillema (2013), building on the work of Hatton and Smith (1995), describe four levels of reflection and emphasize the transition from telling narrative accounts to codifying experiences for knowledge-productive inquiry:			
<i>simple or habitual reflection</i> giving a lay account	<i>descriptive reflection</i> giving a personal justification	<i>dialogic reflection</i> assuming alternative viewpoints	<i>critical reflection</i> giving a sociopolitical explanation
Consistent Patterns/Assumptions			
Lower Level-----Higher Level Narrative-----Critical Descriptive-----Abstract Self-Focused-----Multiple Perspectives			

Research Methods

Research Question

In this study, we explore the following research question: What role do “surface-level” reflections play in teacher inquiry and growth?

Data Sources

The context for this inquiry is a fifth-year master of arts in teaching (MAT) program within a small liberal arts university that graduates approximately 30 teacher candidates each year. Our study analyzes written reflections candidates have shared on a Learning From Practice reflection tool used weekly during a 15-week student teaching seminar.

Reflection tool and protocol. The reflection tool (Appendix A) invites teacher candidates to pose a question about their practice, to provide evidence related to the question, to engage in dialogue with a colleague, and to share realizations and possible actions.

This Learning From Practice tool is based in Dewey’s (1938/1997) concept of experience as the grounding point for all learning and in Cochran-Smith’s (2005) belief in the importance of taking “an ‘inquiry stance’ on practice, by treating one’s work as a site of systematic and intentional inquiry” (p. 8). The reflection tool provides space for candidates to generate questions from their own teaching experiences rather than focusing candidate reflection on particular instructional models or instructor-driven topics. Candidates are invited to determine what content is relevant to them at a particular moment in time and to express concerns, successes, or surprises. The reflection tool thus allows candidates to drive the content of reflection, as we invite teacher candidates to “tap into their own realm of experience, reflect on those experiences, and construct personal meaning to inform their developing practice” (Larrivee, 2006, p. 20).

The reflection tool also offers a form of structured guidance, directing candidates to specific practices, such as posing questions, naming realizations, and proposing an action. In this way, the tool helps candidates to participate explicitly in multiple dimensions of a teacher reflection cycle and can assist new teachers in expanding the range of their reflection practices. Research from Dobbins (1996) has suggested that specifically prompted written reflections deepen preservice teachers’ abilities to describe their own learning and engage broader educational issues. Larrivee (2006) emphasized that preservice teachers “often need to be explicitly prompted to think, respond, and act in new ways” (p. 20). In contrast, Shoffner (2008) highlighted that structured reflection may limit the ability of candidates to authentically share the practical theories they develop from their teaching experiences—and that following steps may not honor individual meaning making. The Learning From Practice form balances structure and flexibility,

providing limited guidance while inviting students to share their individual experiences and concerns.

Finally, the reflection protocol supports teacher learning within a community of professional practice. After writing about an experience or dilemma on the first side of the reflection tool, candidates meet in pairs for 30 minutes to talk about their experiences and share related evidence. Given the intensity of many student teaching experiences, the pairing approach limits the number of voices in conversation so that each candidate can explore his or her own question in depth. After pair discussions, students write for about 10 minutes to identify a realization and/or action step. This approach reflects the work of Tosa and Farrell (2013), who highlighted the importance of productive collegial interactions in supporting a reflective stance on teaching and learning. They emphasized that teachers must be open to criticism and work collaboratively to consider how to improve instruction. The reflection tool supports collaborative interaction and dialogue—as candidates share their practice with other educators, express uncertainty, negotiate trade-offs, and build habits of making their practice public. See Appendix B for an example of a completed reflection document with student work evidence.

Reflection portfolios. For this study, representative reflection portfolios were selected to create a purposeful sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994), representing three different MAT cohorts and all core endorsement areas of our program. Portfolios consist of individual candidate's weekly reflections along with related classroom-based evidence, collected over a period of 8–10 weeks during one student teaching term. Each portfolio typically includes 20–30 pages total per candidate. Our overall data set includes a sample of 34 portfolios: 12 from K–8 candidates, 11 from secondary humanities candidates (4 English and 7 social studies), and 11 from secondary science/math candidates (7 science and 4 math), which represents a typical balance of core endorsements in any given year of our program. For this study, we read and coded a set of eight purposefully selected reflection portfolios. In selecting these portfolios, we aimed for candidates who experienced a range of success and difficulty in student teaching and included four elementary candidates representing a range of grade levels (kindergarten and second, third, and fifth grades) and four secondary candidates representing a range of endorsement areas (two pursuing endorsement in the sciences and two pursuing endorsement in the humanities). Eight portfolios represent approximately 25% of the total sample of 34 portfolios as well as approximately 25% of our cohort each year.

Data Analysis

In an effort to understand in greater detail the kinds of questions that students pose and the possible actions they envision as they reflect upon their teaching, we used a grounded-theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to assess the reflection portfolios. We each independently read the eight portfolios, focusing specifically

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on candidates’ written questions, realizations, and action steps and noting patterns, themes, differences, and surprises. After individual coding, we met to compare codes and to seek agreement on categories we used to characterize candidate responses. After agreeing on categories, we placed candidate comments into tables by subcategories, recording one categorized response per candidate for each section of the reflection tool for each week. For example, questions posed by candidates each week were coded into one of three subcategories—and each student’s questioning per week was coded into one of the subcategories. We then made counts of each subcategory to consider if the patterns had changed from early in the student teaching experience (the first 4 weeks) to later in the experience (second 4 weeks). The counts reflect the total number of responses in any subcategory, including if one candidate provided more than one of those responses over the course of the semester. We reviewed the data again for outliers and further patterns. We then purposefully selected representative student reflections for each pattern identified and considered the strengths in what are typically labeled surface-level reflections.

Findings: Looking Again at Surface-Level Reflections

Here we share patterns in how teacher candidates posed questions, shared realizations, and identified action steps. We analyze reflective statements to make visible ways that reflections might be sponsoring teacher growth and to demonstrate that different habits of reflection are intertwined.

Questioning

The Learning From Practice reflection tool asks candidates to generate a question in relation to their teaching experience by asking, “What *question* does this experience raise for you?” We analyzed the kinds of questions generated and found that candidates asked at least one question and often multiple questions. Candidate questioning reflected three kinds of reflection strategies: (a) narrations, when candidates do not immediately name a question but instead describe or narrate a classroom experience, often implying a question about teaching; (b) “how can I?” questions, when candidates ask a practical question about how to solve a teaching problem; and (c) reframing, when candidates use questioning to consider other perspectives. Most of the questions posed by candidates take the form of “how can I” or “how should I” and often are related to a specific instructional practice implemented. These kinds of reflections are often described as low level (Larrivee, 2006; Lee, 2005; Mena-Marcos, García-Rodríguez, & Tillema, 2013; Ward & McCotter, 2004).

Candidates share narrations and pose “how can I?” questions throughout the student teaching experience. Like other teacher educators, we found that reframing questions are rarely posed. We also noted that candidates ask reframing questions

only during the second half of the student teaching experience. As seen in Table 1, candidates pose narrations and “how can I?” questions related to *students* early in the student teaching experience, and they pose “how can I?” questions related to *instruction* as well as reframing questions later in the student teaching experience. This suggests that early in the experience, candidates are more likely to be orienting to the classroom context and focusing on understanding and connecting to students. Later candidates are more focused on instructional issues.

Narrations. Some reflections are notable for their narration and/or lack of a question. In the act of narration, candidates describe a range of issues they face, and sometimes questions are implied rather than directly stated. Through narrations, candidates appear to be orienting in a general way to the realities of teaching. Candidates describe challenges in managing time and take note of students’ strengths and needs. Candidates articulate a growing awareness of the context of student teaching and express concern for negotiating sustainable teaching practices. Candidates describe the challenges they face in figuring out procedures and managing time and the struggles they face in planning for instruction. For example, “I often don’t get through everything I want to in my math lessons. I struggle with wanting to plan many activities just in case we get through things quickly and I never want to not have something planned” (A. H., March 5, 2013). This candidate productively describes the tension between overplanning and underplanning and states, “I often don’t get through everything I want to in my math lessons” and “I struggle with wanting to plan many activities.” This narration is focused on a pedagogical concern. Reflections like these are often described as surface level because they are descriptive and a specific instructional question is not posed. Although this narration frames teaching as covering material (“I often don’t get through everything”), it also implies important questions about instructional practice, such as, Have I planned properly? Am I trying to cover too much material? How much math content is appropriate for my students in one lesson?

Candidates also describe their growing awareness of the vast differences between students:

Table 1
Patterns in Teacher Candidate Questioning

Pattern	First half of semester	Second half of semester	Total
Narrations	10	5	15
How can I?			42
Students	13	5	
Instruction	6	18	
Reframing	0	6	6
Total	29	34	63

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I’ve just been really blown away by the differences in the kids I teach. I started thinking about this in more detail when I took a serious look at the students’ written work in their survey responses. . . . This has me thinking deeply about many things like engagement/grading/personal teaching philosophy. (J. S., February 14, 2012)

This candidate expresses how reviewing students’ written work deeply impacted his thinking. He notes that he was “really blown away by the differences in the kids I teach” and that “this has me thinking deeply about many things.” He names a wide range of intersecting pedagogical concerns, connecting the student differences he has experienced to broader issues like why a particular student might or might not be engaged. Reflections like this are often labeled as technical reflection because the candidate identifies complexity but does not explicitly question assumptions and/or consider other points of view. Descriptions often contain implicit questions, for example, this candidate is considering questions such as, What is my teaching philosophy? Which students are engaged? Why? How do I evaluate the vast range of students’ written work?

The act of narrating appears to support candidates as they orient to teaching as a profession, helping them name the many dimensions of teachers’ work, such as classroom procedures, planning, and student engagement. By looking again at descriptions, we note implied questions and a focus on pedagogical concerns.

“How can I” questions. As noted in Table 1, throughout the course of the student teaching experience, candidates shift the focus of their questioning from students to instructional concerns. This suggests that candidates first focus on understanding student strengths and needs and later focus their questioning on the curriculum and teaching practices.

We noted two different patterns in how candidates pose questions about students. Elementary candidates in particular express concern for *balancing student support and upholding classroom expectations*. For example, in describing a student presenting behavior challenges in class, one candidate asks, “How do I make him see his value and praise him without allowing him to get away with behaviors that cannot be tolerated?” (K. O. R., February 14, 2012). This teacher candidate uses a “how do I” question to frame the tension of valuing individual students and establishing community norms for behavior. She demonstrates awareness of other points of view by expressing that despite challenging behavior, her student has “value.” Framing her concern as a tension between giving praise and enacting discipline opens up two lenses for evaluating next steps.

Secondary candidates, conversely, tend to express concern about *gaining respect and engaging or approaching students*, as seen in the following questions: “How can I get students to see me as the teacher, listen to me and give me the respect that they give Mrs. R.?” (E. H., January 22, 2013); “How can I (or should I) approach students about which I am concerned? Do I even have time for that?” (M. M., January 29, 2013). The first question makes visible the teacher candidate’s

understanding that her actions impact how students respond to her. The second question makes visible the teacher candidate's effort to envision a range of possible actions—from approaching students to not approaching students of concern.

When posing “how can I” questions in relation to instruction, candidates highlight two concerns: (a) engaging all students and (b) teaching for understanding. In considering engagement, candidates highlight particular instructional issues, such as how curriculum and teacher questioning can influence student engagement:

I am just very confused about how to make the Reading Street curriculum more engaging and interesting for students. There are so many components that go into reading (i.e., vocab, comprehension, fluency . . .). How can we spend adequate time on engaging them all? (E. V. H., March 5, 2013)

This teacher candidate expresses confusion, names the multiple components of balanced reading instruction, and uses the question “How can we spend adequate time on engaging them all?” to frame the tension between instructional time, student engagement, and the components of the reading curriculum. Her use of the term “all” suggests that she is actively engaged in thinking about student learning and engagement in relation to curriculum. Her use of the term “we” suggests that she understands that the tension between the child and the curriculum is a dilemma that all educators engage.

Another teacher candidate posed the question “How do I ask questions that have entry points for more students?” (J. S., March 13, 2012). This teacher candidate uses a “how do I” question to identify two areas of instructional concern: teacher questioning strategies and creating entry points for students. His use of the term “more students” suggests his awareness that students have different learning needs and that his students are not equally engaged.

In highlighting teaching for understanding, candidates actively consider student thinking and needed background information as well as how to frame learning experiences so that they are intentionally focused on meaningful understandings: “How do I allow students to express their thoughts and learn from their mistakes without teaching the other students incorrectly, and how can I change this lesson or other lessons to frame understanding?” (K. O. R., February 28, 2012). This elementary teacher candidate uses a “how do I” question to frame the tension between honoring how “students express their thoughts” and creating lessons to “frame understanding.” A secondary science candidate reflects on a similar question:

I'm curious about how much prep or background information I should do with the students in order to create meaning out of this lab instead of simply having it be an engaging activity. Should I do a demo to model the activity? What analysis questions are appropriate? (E. H., March 5, 2013)

This teacher candidate expresses curiosity and uses a “should I” question to frame the tension between planning an engaging lab activity and supporting students in creating meaning and scientific understanding. She uses questions to debate a range

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of approaches: “prep or background information,” “demo to model,” and “analysis questions.” Reflections like this are labeled as technical because the candidate is asking questions about a specific learning task. We note that both of these candidates are framing central instructional dilemmas and are considering their students’ understandings in relation to content. Candidates may use reflections like these to highlight a continuum of choices or actions by contrasting what they view as the limits of those choices, or each end of the continuum, for example, juxtaposing “learn from mistakes” with “teaching incorrectly” or contrasting “engaging activity” with “clear learning.” Posing “how can I” questions supports candidates in clarifying instructional issues and possibilities and in considering a range of action steps they might take.

Reframing questions. Candidates also pose reframing questions, wherein they reconsider instructional purposes, state uncertainty, and debate trade-offs. As noted in Table 1, candidates rarely pose reframing questions, and reframing questions occur only in the second half of the student teaching experience. This suggests that candidates have the capacity to ask reframing questions and that they may need time to orient to teaching and to consider possible instructional actions before questioning the curriculum or the assumptions they bring to teaching.

When posing reframing questions, candidates express concern about the pace of instruction as mandated in curriculum guides, consider the purposes of learning experiences, and consider their own assumptions:

My experience has been me being so frustrated with how fast *Math Expressions* moves children! . . . Since [our district] is standards-based, 3rd graders only need to understand area of rectangles and perimeter of objects. What *Math Expressions* goes into is much more complex. Why don’t the curriculum that is mandated and the standards align? (E. V. H., February 12, 2013)

Posing reframing questions appears to support candidates in thinking critically about curricula and their instructional choices. This reflective statement makes visible how intertwined different kinds of reflection are. This candidate names her frustration and adds emphasis by using an exclamation mark. This kind of reflective statement is often described in the literature as self-centered. She then makes an instructional comment, noting the difference in complexity between district standards and the focus of the curriculum materials. She expresses awareness of the impact on learners, writing, “how fast *Math Expressions* moves children!” Finally, she poses a question about instructional alignment, asking a reframing question about curriculum and standards. Her question is not about “how to” but rather asks “why.” This candidate productively engages her feelings and the tension between teaching a mandated curriculum and engaging students where they are in their math learning.

Realizations

Candidate realizations in our sample reflect three general patterns: (a) affirming talk, which includes self-reminders, self-encouragement, and claiming agency around particular issues; (b) taking perspective, which means placing an immediate issue in a larger picture, such as seeing teacher learning as a long-term endeavor or coming to terms with factors candidates can or cannot control; and (c) questioning assumptions, in which candidates pose critical questions, see things in a new way, and/or name new insights.

As shown in Table 2, 50% (39/78) of the written realizations involved questioning assumptions, and over the course of student teaching the number of times that candidates questioned assumptions increased. For example, 41% (12/29) of all realizations in the first half of student teaching involved questioning assumptions, while in the second half this percentage had grown to 55% (27/49).

Yet it is to the other statements that we direct our attention. Fifty percent of all realizations (39/78) reflect an even combination of affirming talk (19) and taking perspective (20)—statements that do not involve critical questioning, major shifts in perspective, or deep insights into student learning. Like reframing statements, these realizations shift over time, but in the opposite direction. Taken together, 17 affirming talk and perspective-taking statements in the first half of student teaching amount to nearly 59% of all realizations (17/29), whereas this percentage falls to 45% (22/49) in the second half.

Affirming talk. In stating a realization as affirming talk, candidates remind themselves of what they know, talk themselves through fear, and/or claim agency in relation to various constraints. Klein (2008) highlighted the importance of self-talk to visualizing “something not present, but desired” (p. 113). Such comments may focus on garnering courage to push back on an existing curriculum or materials: “I need to not be afraid to tweak assessments or make different assessments to see what they know” (K. O. R., March 6, 2012). Other comments reassure and remind candidates of their own abilities:

[A realization I’ve had] is to calm down and plan this lesson as I always plan lessons—with intention and thoughtfulness and trust in my own abilities, I can’t

Table 2
Patterns in Teacher Candidate Realizations

Pattern	First half of semester	Second half of semester	Total
Affirming talk	6	13	19
Taking perspective	11	9	20
Questioning assumptions	12	27	39
Total	29	49	78

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do everything perfectly every time and I shouldn't be obsessing about trying to.
(L. R. P., March 6, 2012)

In other cases, candidates seek confidence in situations of accountability, as in this case, prior to parent–teacher conferences:

As teachers, we make our grading scale/breakdown with a lot of thought and consideration. The grades don't lie. As long as we know that our system is “fair” and represents students' knowledge, we should not be worried to talk about it w/ parents. (E. H., January 29, 2013)

Such comments are often understood as weaker forms of reflection, in that they amount to a need for emotional reassurance and validation. Yet such comments help us see the full range of concerns that beginning teachers encounter—including the clear need to remind themselves of their own knowledge, worth, and power and to reassert these things when making specific teaching decisions. Such comments suggest the many ways in which teachers are vulnerable to self-doubt and fear as they work under powerful observational gazes of mentors, supervisors, principals, and parents. Initiating change can be risky for a student teacher; even well-considered judgment might be called into question. Finally, these comments reveal that concerns for affirmation are not isolated but intertwined with critical instructional practices, for example, how to shape an assessment, whether to trust one's abilities in lesson planning, and how to develop and represent fair grading systems. Affirming talk helps us see that worth, validation, agency, and emotional confidence are always woven into teaching decisions—that learning to manage and sustain self-confidence is central to the work of every teacher.

Perspective taking. In perspective taking, candidates reflect awareness of a longer timeline for teacher learning—that not all has to be learned at once. They assert the time it takes to build classroom routines and to connect to students. They name the complexity of teacher learning. For example, a secondary candidate concerned about establishing her presence in the classroom writes,

It takes time to earn the respect of students. This problem may seem big now, but as time goes on, they will become used to me and will realize that they need to listen/pay attention to me. I need to be patient with this, this won't happen overnight. (E. H., January 22, 2013)

In referencing the challenges of a mandated performance assessment, an elementary candidate writes, “The [assessment] is about where you are in your quest to become a master teacher, not an expectation that you should already be there. . . . The most important piece in all this is self-reflection and the motivation to keep improving” (L. R. P., March 6, 2012).

In perspective taking, candidates also distinguish between factors they can and cannot control. One secondary candidate writes regarding her effort to provide an after-school makeup opportunity,

I can only give students the opportunity to make up the lab; I can't *make* them take advantage of it. As long as I continue to make this option available to students, and encourage them to do it, I am doing my part. They need to step up and do their part. (E. H., March 19, 2013)

Such forms of reflection are often dismissed as being self-centered, rationalizing, or even defensive. Yet, taking perspective, like affirming talk, helps candidates not become overwhelmed or defeated by the immediate challenges they face, especially by providing broader images of their own growth trajectories and responsibilities. Perspective taking suggests that candidates have to work hard to maintain a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2000) in relation to their own development—a stance focused on learning and not just on a display of successful performance. By placing their own learning in a longer time frame, or by reframing roles and responsibilities, candidates wrestle with ideal visions of themselves (e.g., as a “master teacher”), learning to be patient with their growth. Candidates experiment with, or try on, various frames, both to engage outside pressures and to reenvision problems that seem extremely hard. In this way, perspective taking nurtures hope in candidates by allowing them to temporarily make sense of complex situations and pressure, to which they can return later with greater experience and expertise. Through perspective taking, candidates perform rich, emotionally laden identity work (Alsup, 2006) that is fraught with ethical questions pertinent to their ongoing professional growth.

Questioning assumptions. In this form of realization, candidates question the instructional assumptions and larger purposes of their actions. Such reframing occurs in relation to instructional assumptions, student learning, and recognizing and supporting the whole student. In relation to instruction, a secondary social studies candidate writes,

The big thing I realized is that a “review” doesn't always have to be in the form of taking out a block of time at the beginning of class to go over things. Review can be integrated into lessons. K. specifically mentioned having stopping points for clarification during subsequent lessons. (A. M., February 28, 2012)

In this comment, the candidate reconsiders the assumption that “review” is separate from ongoing learning activities. Reframing comments provide a sense of possibility for candidates, breathing new life into their perspectives on students and instruction. Such comments open up new horizons for action and assist candidates in seeing their practice in new ways. We note that questioning of assumptions occurred most frequently in the second half of the student teaching experience.

Action Steps

The debriefing form asks candidates to use the sentence frame “An action I might take is . . .” in relation to their questions and/or realizations. In Table 3, candidate action steps are reflected in two different ways. First, they are divided

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into broad content areas: (a) management/learning community–related actions and (b) instruction/curriculum actions. Across these areas, about twice as many action steps relate to instruction compared to management. Second, we categorized these steps by whether the proposed action was “general” or “specific.” Results suggest that candidates are more likely to name a general direction for action as opposed to a specific step. General steps offer relatively vague suggestions for responding to a particular instructional challenge, such as a desire to include “more group work.” Specific steps involve identifying concrete changes to lesson plans, assessments, or rubrics or naming specific instructional actions. For example, a science student teacher writes,

I will stress the need to write observations as they go and answer the questions embedded in the procedures. I will also bring back the models in the questions: How do your models of polymers and cross-linked polymers represent the goo? (E. H., March 5, 2013)

Specific steps for some candidates arise in relation to evidence presented; other candidates note that specific steps are generated through collegial conversation.

The prevalence of “general” action steps in our sample reflects a common concern in the literature that preservice teachers can become both “technical” (focused on what to do) and “surface” in their reflections. Yet the tendency to develop general steps suggests that candidates may be working through important phases in learning, such as tentatively searching for solutions, actively generating ideas, and setting broad directions for action. For example, candidates’ tendency to produce general steps suggests that they often need to situate specific actions in a broader frame, that is, to name a big-picture direction for themselves, before devoting time to specifics:

General instructional step. “An action I might take would be to create a more relaxing and inviting writing environment for the students” (E. V. H., January 29, 2013).

General management step. “I intend to up interpersonal conversations between myself and students to try to connect on some non-academic levels” (M. M., February 5, 2013).

Table 3
Patterns in Teacher Candidates’ Action Steps

Pattern	First half of semester	Second half of semester	Total
Management/instruction			
Management	10	8	18
Instruction related	18	21	39
General/specific			
General step	20	14	34
Specific step	8	14	22

In these comments, candidates reflect upon issues of classroom climate and how students might best be served through reshaping the social–emotional and/or relational culture. Here candidates set broad frames for growth, for example, they shift away from pure content concerns, cognitive achievement, lesson planning, and tweaking the existing curriculum. One candidate sees connections between the “inviting” nature of the environment and students’ desire to write. Another names the “interpersonal” realm as an area for growth, noting the importance of relationship building through “non-academic” conversation.

Such comments suggest that preservice candidates need time to develop such vision—to decide which among many multiple instructional goals they should prioritize and pursue. The proposed steps are general, yet they also reflect important paradigm work, a shifting vision among the many stances and positions teachers can take with their students and toward their own work. Candidates may need to take such steps before they are able to focus their reflections and actions on detailed teaching practice.

Discussion

Teacher candidates are faced with an immense range of issues to make sense of during student teaching: individual student concerns, using or generating a curriculum, developing specific teaching plans, building community, adapting to work conditions, assessing student learning, responding to management challenges, collaborating with a mentor, implementing school-wide mandates, and reflecting on their own identity as a new educator. They encounter multiple issues at once. Our study suggests that candidates rely on a wide range of reflection strategies to manage this complex situation, including significant amounts of narrating or describing, technical questioning about immediate teaching situations (How do I . . . ? or How can I . . . ?), self-affirmation, and perspective taking. They name and try on various general action steps. Indeed, candidates use diverse pathways for accomplishing the fundamental work of reflection, creating a “continuous interaction between inference and observation” (Clarà, 2015, p. 265).

Typical models of reflection in the literature describe low and high levels of reflection, often equating low levels with descriptive accounts, lack of questioning, and a focus on the self. Abstract, critical insights are valued over concrete or technical concerns. Yet, in our view, candidates often locate for themselves the space in which they need to learn. Likewise, candidates need time to assess the many factors that are at play in the school context and to build a sense of agency before they can reframe their stance toward instructional dilemmas. They may need to set very broad directions for action (general steps) before being able to generate specific forms of practice. Furthermore, just as candidates use many different approaches to give coherence to uncertain situations, our candidates appear to achieve different kinds of coherence. Teacher educators often look for curricular or pedagogical insights in

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student thinking; yet candidates may have different aims, for example, establishing a kind of “emotional coherence” with their work and clarifying how they feel, who they are or want to be, or what their confidence and agency are in relation to complex work demands. This suggests that emotional coherence and identity work, although often underappreciated, are central to the work of teacher reflection.

As we have explored and discussed teacher candidate thinking, we have grappled with our own assumptions about teacher reflection. We have asked ourselves questions such as, How can we both honor teacher candidate reflection strategies and capacities and support them in engaging in new strategies? How do descriptive accounts help us see growth in teacher questioning and in reconsidering practice? How does a particular candidate’s reflection support growth and development at a particular moment in time? We do not assume that teacher candidates do not need support to reflect or that all reflection leads to teacher growth. Instead, we respond to our awareness that beginning teachers are asked to navigate a vast array of intense, new experiences. Through our analysis, we have found that reflection is an everyday process where early career professionals use “spontaneous, common, real thinking” (Clarà, 2015, p. 270). By looking again at teacher candidates’ reflections, we are engaging the tension of honoring these efforts to make sense of teaching experiences and analytically naming different aspects of reflection.

Limitations of our research include the small sample size and that our data proceed from a single graduate-level university program, which results in representing a limited range of candidates and potential reflection practices. In addition, the reflection practices that we capture occur in a specific setting—on a university campus during a seminar, rather than in a school-based classroom setting. For example, verbal reflections in school-based contexts might shape different reflective practices or themes than those we see in our sample. Our qualitative emphasis, while helping us see nuances in patterns of reflection within a small sample, does not allow us to analyze broader patterns over time with larger numbers of candidates. We see room for continued research to test our reflection categories against larger samples.

Yet we also believe our work holds implications for teacher education practitioners. A student teaching seminar is a common learning setting in teacher education programs. As we plan for our own student teaching seminar, for example, the following questions guide our practice:

- What are our own assumptions and beliefs about what productive reflection looks like?
- What steps are candidates taking with their everyday reflections on teaching?
- To what extent do candidates have opportunities to make visible, record, and revisit reflections over time?

- How are candidates supported to question, express realizations, and propose action steps?
- What opportunities are there to engage in collegial dialogue about practice?

By considering these questions and looking again at what are typically deemed surface-level reflections, we engage a competence-based, rather than deficit-based, view of early teacher learning. We work to value how seemingly routine reflections serve a relevant purpose for teacher growth and development. Although reflection practices across a range of beginning teachers will necessarily be diverse, we believe that as teacher educators we can grow in our ability to identify, understand, and even normalize common patterns and strategies of reflection, to best support beginning teachers in the processes of entering a highly complex profession.

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Learning from Practice Student Teaching Debrief

Please reflect on one experience (e.g., challenging, successful, or surprising) from your student teaching that is on your mind today.

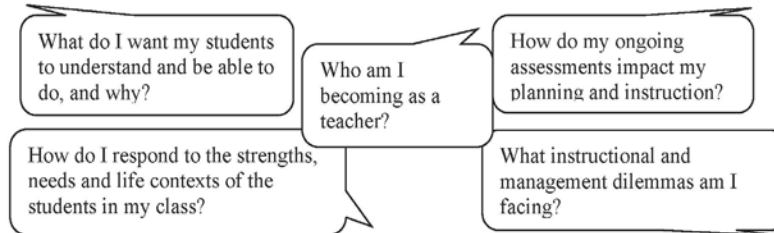
Name _____ Class/Grade Level _____
Date _____ Subject/Topic _____

Please write about your experience below. What question does this experience raise for you?

Is there anything about the context of this experience that is important to note? If so, explain.

What student and/or teacher evidence (e.g. lesson plans, student work) is relevant to this experience or would help you further reflect on this experience?

Please mark the core question for this course with which your experience most relates.



After your discussion of this experience, respond to one or both of the following:

A realization I've had . . .
An action I might take . . .

What new or lingering question(s) do you now have?

Appendix B

Example of a Completed Reflection Tool and Evidence Included

Learning from Practice
Student Teaching Debrief

Please reflect on one experience (e.g., challenging, successful, or surprising) from your student teaching that is on your mind today.

Name [redacted] Class/Grade Level 2nd
Date MARCH 6, 2012 Subject/Topic Reading

Please write about your experience below. What question does this experience raise for you?

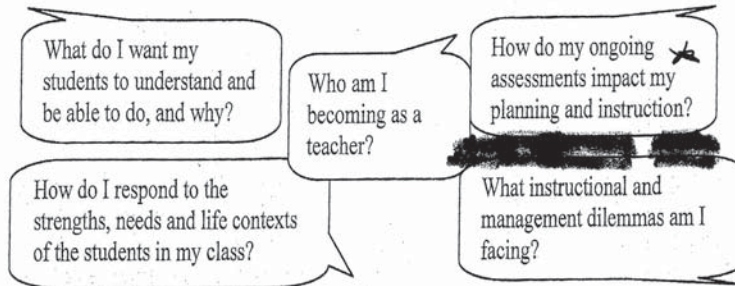
We spent all last week working on comprehension and trying to find the main idea of a story. This is something we are focusing on in writing as well. The week before all of the students did really well on the reading test but this week the kids were all across the board when it came to the writing part. Because of ELL testing our low ELL students have taken the test because they have been in class the last 3 weeks and I know they would struggle with the writing but I was shocked to find some of my higher kids had difficulties as well. We have done multiple lessons and even explicitly wrote down the main idea on a public record and no one could recall it. I know that this assessment is awful and so my question is how can I ~~test~~ teach this concept and assess it in a worthwhile manner taking into account my students needs?

Is there anything about the context of this experience that is important to note? If so, explain.
19/25 students are ELL
11 are low ELL
only 11 of my students are benchmark.

What student and/or teacher evidence (e.g. lesson plans, student work) is relevant to this experience or would help you further reflect on this experience?

The story itself.

Please mark the core question for this course with which your experience most relates.



After your discussion of this experience, respond to one or both of the following:

A realization I've had . . .

An action I might take . . .

Students often have a tension between verbally being able to say what they know and writing it. Giving them a chance to write what they do know and rephrasing test questions for better understanding can help the students. I need to not be afraid to tweak assessments or make different assessments to see what they know.

Directions
Read each question. Write your answer.

14 What is this selection mostly about?

This selection is mostly
about Helen.

15 Why did the author tell about Helen's pranks at the beginning of the story?

because she wan't to be
in charge.

Directions

Read each question. Write your answer.

14 What is this selection mostly about?

this is mostly about
helen was bland.

15 Why did the author tell about Helen's pranks at the beginning of the story?

because we can
see how she was
bland.