

The Use of Reflective Journals in the Development of Teaching Skills and Teacher Education in the Occupied West Bank

Kefah A. Barham

There is a significant literature on the value of journaling to support teachers in reflecting on their pedagogical practices as well as their duties and obligations as educators. Institutions of teacher education should therefore provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop their self-reflective skills. A mixed-method action research approach was used in this study to examine the perspectives of 71 teacher candidates in the occupied West Bank on reflective journaling (RJ). The development of professionals' reflective and critical thinking is one of the goals of higher education (Berger & Youkeles, 2000). The use of reflective journaling as a teaching tool may be of use to professionals learning the abilities required to lead a classroom. The key question this study addresses is: What are teacher candidates' experiences with RJ during their practicum course? A triangulated, mixed-method approach was employed and converging quantitative and qualitative data were collected through questionnaire responses and interviews. The study's findings suggest teacher candidates benefited significantly from writing reflective journals in developing motivation and self-confidence and strengthening their writing skills.

Keywords: reflective journals, reflection, pre-service teachers, Palestine, practicum

Educational experts generally concur that reflection is critical in the field of teaching and teacher education (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Jenkins & Clarke, 2017; Boud & Walker, 1998). Self-reflection and reflective practices are a vital part of the educational curriculum, as they foster higher-order thinking and self-regulation ability in students (Kovanović, et al., 2018). Boud and colleagues (1985) define reflection as encompassing “intellectual and affective

KEFAH A. BARHAM is on the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training at An-Najah National University, Nablus, West Bank, Palestine.

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activities in which individuals engage to explore their experience in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (p. 33).

In this study, I reflect on the positive impacts of journal writing in teacher preparation and explore how this might look in the context of Nablus in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. To this end, I asked registered students in practicum courses at An-Najah National University’s Faculty of Education to keep reflective journals during their practicum fieldwork. Specifically, I wanted to look at these teacher candidates’ use of journals and observe how they react to the journal writing experience. The study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. How did the teacher candidates perceive their reflective journal writing experiences in the practicum course?
2. What are the benefits of the reflective journal as perceived by teacher candidates during their practicum course?

I was curious about the use of reflective writing and its impact on students in the Palestinian environment because it was their first experience writing reflective journals. Furthermore, stakeholders’ (instructors, university faculty, and department policymakers) critical assessment of what happens when teacher candidates employ reflective journaling in the practicum course may help them increase the quality of the practicum experience to prepare better qualified future teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational researchers tend to agree that reflection is critical in the field of teaching and teacher education (Apgar, 2022; Hojeij, et al., 2021; Kolb, 2015). One primary way to engage in reflective practice is through journal writing both to inform and record teachers’ learning and growth (Afzali, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019).

Current research reveals that journal writing helps educators during all phases of their careers in refining their knowledge (e.g., pedagogical, conceptual, theoretical), teaching practices, and the self-evaluation of their performance (Alt & Raichel, 2020; Lindroth, 2014). Lee (2008) argues that journaling can activate teacher candidates’ thinking and encourage meaning-making during the learning process. The journal-writing process can help learners (including teachers) examine their thoughts and guide them to succeed as they move forward (Burton & McNamara, 2009). Researchers frequently refer to this process as *critical reflection*, wherein writers generate deeper meaning from their experiences at a more advanced

stage (Cengiz, 2020). As a result, reflective writing is a pedagogical method that can improve critical thinking (Han, et al., 2018) and an important tool for encouraging introspection (Khanjani, et al., 2018).

A significant number of research studies have investigated and highlighted the usefulness of reflective writing in influencing teacher candidates and in-service teachers' professional development and improvement (Denton, 2018; Hojeij, et al., 2021; Khanjani, et al., 2018; Cengiz, 2020). Reflection allows teacher candidates to develop knowledge by asking questions, criticizing, assessing, and assisting them in bridging the gap between their imagined beliefs and the realities of teaching (Denton, 2018). Reflection assists prospective instructors in critically examining their work and making sensible and practical decisions about what to do in certain situations (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Khanjani, et al., 2018). It is vital to prepare teacher candidates for critical thinking and reflection-based instruction. The interaction of their knowledge and beliefs with the teacher education curriculum, including field experiences, will help instill in them more sophisticated views of the teaching and learning process (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Lee, 2008). As Lee (2008) explains, journaling is reflective writing that requires prospective teachers to develop knowledge by challenging their beliefs about teaching and learning.

Journaling also is essential to bridge the gap between theory and practice and establish professional and personal competencies (Khales, 2016; Raba' & Tanni, 2016), which is why practicum courses have long been a crucial component of any university-based teacher preparation program (Afzali, 2018; Astuti & Drajat, 2022; Raba' & Tanni, 2016). The practicum component allows teachers to practice inside the classroom, and prepares them for authentic teaching and learning environments, cultivating their classroom experience while developing pedagogical and practical skills (Farrah, 2019; Khales, 2016). Raba' and Tanni (2016) emphasize that the quality of every practicum experience can be improved if teacher candidates are guided in finding and utilizing learning opportunities and are engaged in a structure that helps candidates examine and analyze their settings in ways that build on prior knowledge. As a result, colleges of education, government education bodies, and schools should work closely together to achieve their intended outcomes for all stakeholders.

REFLECTION THEORIES

Reflection is a self-examination and self-discovery process that can help us understand our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It is an

essential tool for psychological development and growth. Several reflection theories have emerged over time, each offering a distinct viewpoint on how we can use reflection to improve our lives (Irvine & Johnstone, 2007). The most influential theorists in the area of reflection on whom this study will center are Kolb (1984), Schön (1984), and Brookfield (2017).

The Experiential Learning Model developed in 1984 by psychologist David Kolb proposes that learning is an active process in which individuals construct their own knowledge and understanding through reflection and experience. The model offers a useful framework to understand how people learn through experience and reflection. It divides learning into stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

The first stage of concrete experience entails direct involvement with a situation or action. The model's second stage, reflective observation, involves reflecting on and analyzing the experiences obtained during the first stage to gain insight into what was learned. This can be accomplished by writing or conversing about one's experiences, or through activities such as brainstorming or journaling. The third stage of abstract conceptualization applies what was learned in the first two phases to new situations or contexts to viewing things from various angles and employing creative problem-solving to generate new ideas or solutions. Finally, the model's fourth stage of active experimentation puts what was learned during all three previous phases into practice in real-world situations.

Donald Schön (1984) has had a significant impact on our understanding of professional practice and what it takes to become or train a professional. Schön's contribution was to place reflection at the heart of what professionals do by introducing the reflective practice and reflective practitioner concepts within the learning process. This process encourages practitioners to reflect on their own experiences to gain insight into their own behavior and beliefs. It focuses on bridging the connection between theory and practice and is rooted in the idea that practitioners can learn from their mistakes and apply what they have learned to improve their performance. Through Knowing-in-Action, Reflection-in-Action, and Reflection-on-Action, Schön (1984) claimed reflective practitioners should be able to spot problems, analyze them, devise solutions, and then evaluate the outcomes of their efforts.

Stephen Brookfield (1995) developed the concept of the four lenses of reflection, which suggests there are four distinct ways of looking at any situation or experience that can be used to gain a more comprehensive

understanding. The autobiographical lens reflects one's own experiences and emotions and urges people to consider how their personal experiences have shaped their perspectives and beliefs. The critical incident lens focuses on investigating a specific event or situation to determine what went wrong and why. This lens helps people identify patterns in their behavior and determine strategies for development. The critical analysis lens examines a given situation from different angles to gain a more complete understanding and encourages the study of different viewpoints and objectively evaluating them. Finally, the fourth dimension is the collaborative inquiry lens which involves engaging with others to jointly explore ideas and solutions (Brookfield, 2017).

WHY IS FORMAL REFLECTION NECESSARY?

Many teachers already think about their teaching; they may initiate a process of reflection in response to a specific problem that has developed in their classroom, or they may just engage in considering ways to strengthen their teaching as they proceed in their careers. Farrell (2019) found that a good teacher could think through a situation and make judgments based on that reasoning. Through their reflections, they may figure out why things happened (Mohamad, 2013) and may generate remedies or strategies to ensure things go differently in the future. Teachers can record their thoughts in reflective journals and record concepts, experiences, or interactions to obtain insight into self-awareness and learning (Thorpe, 2004). These reflective journals can then become a permanent record of one's ideas and experiences. Teachers could use those journals to review their own performance or create an academic relationship with a mentor to further strengthen their teaching (Denton, 2018). Schön (1984) defined this cycle of thinking as *reflection in action* and deemed it a crucial component in the development of teacher candidates.

To summarize, reflective journaling is an effective method for pre-service teachers to gain insight into their own teaching practice and reflect on their classroom experiences. Pre-service teachers can also pinpoint areas for development and devise strategies to address them.

TYPES OF JOURNALS

According to Lee (2008), four types of journals are commonly used in teacher preparation: discussion or dialogue journals, response journals, collaborative/interactive group journals, and teaching journals. As Lee (2008)

explains, discussion or dialogue journals involve teachers and students writing and exchanging writing in the same document or book to engage in mutual reflections and discussion. In response journals (or diaries), students record “their personal reactions to, questions about, and comments on what they read, write about, see, listen to, discuss, do, and think” (Parsons, 1994, p.12, as cited by Lee, 2008). Teacher candidates participate in collaborative/interactive group journals by writing and exchanging journals with peers.

Response and teaching journals, as opposed to conversation journals, emphasize the teacher candidates engaging with themselves in a reflective process that develops self-understanding and reflectivity. In contrast, collaborative/interactive group journals focus on group dynamics and synergy created by requiring teacher candidates to take responsibility for learning by sharing ideas and developing insights among themselves, as well as considering a variety of viewpoints among colleagues. This ability will help them throughout their careers (Lee, 2008).

A response journal is “a notebook or folder in which students record their personal reactions to, questions about, and reflections on what they read, write, observe, listen to, discuss, do, and think in a variety of formats” (Parsons, 1994, p. 12 as cited by Good & Whang, 2002). It encourages teacher candidates to ask questions, confess confusion, establish connections, identify with others, and grow and change philosophically by inviting them to actively engage in reflective thinking (Good & Whang, 2002).

In a study at Alquds University in Palestine, Khales (2016) investigated the function of reflective dialogue to help student instructors overcome problems in a practicum course. Khales discovered that reflective dialog alleviated practicum students’ challenges, raised their self-confidence, and enhanced their capacity to communicate with their students and among themselves.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This research was conducted at An-Najah National University in the northern part of the Occupied West Bank, Palestine, in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training, which prepares students to be future teachers.

Palestine became a political entity following World War II as a result of the 1948 Palestinian War, and the area designated by the UN partition has been occupied by Israel ever since. In 1967, Israel seized East Jerusalem and occupied the West Bank and Gaza, establishing the Occupied

Palestinian Territory (Nicolai, 2007). Officially, the West Bank and Gaza occupation ended with the 1993 Oslo agreement, although Israel's occupation on the ground continues to this day.

The Palestinian education system developed in its formative years against a backdrop of ongoing crisis, recurrent emergency, low standards, and challenges in engendering a common Palestinian ideology and vision. The establishment of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) under the Oslo Accords put Palestinians in control of and gave them the opportunity to prioritize their own national education system (Affounch, 2007; Mikki & Jondi, 2010; Nicolai, 2007).

Despite enduring great hardships under occupation, Palestinians continue to put a high value on education and view it as a critical component of resistance and the hope of living a better life. Education is the Palestinians' primary political weapon against the existing situation of routine violence and Israeli occupation; the ability to learn inspires the desire for justice and independence (Pherali & Turner, 2017).

It is clear in this context that teacher preparation is of the utmost importance in Palestine. According to Barahmeh (2016), practicum courses in Palestinian institutions follow three stages: observation, participation, and evaluation. During the observation stage, teacher candidates spend their time in cooperative schools where they can observe school norms and environments. They attend lessons with their mentor teacher in these institutions to become familiar with the procedures and activities that occur both inside and outside the classroom. For several weeks during the participation stage, the student teacher engages in educational activities, experiences, and responsibilities both within and outside the classroom. They are obliged to participate in school committees, events, and tasks at this point. They must design and facilitate lessons as well as deliver some instruction with the guidance and support of the cooperating teacher. Academic supervisors make on-site visits to provide orientation, advice, suggestions, and support to candidates.

In the final evaluation stage of the practicum experience academic supervisors visit student instructors at least twice during the training term. On the initial visit, the supervisor provides encouragement and criticism, as well as observing and analyzing teaching aids and lesson planning. On the second visit, the academic supervisor evaluates and grades the student teachers' performance. The portfolio is the most critical component of this strategy, as each teacher candidate has been tasked to prepare a portfolio that includes instructional aids, CDs, charts, daily diaries, and lesson plans.

During their term of study, teacher candidates are based in school settings and engage in six sequential practical courses. The first begins with minimal observations in schools and the last one includes 120 hours of teaching in a classroom setting. At each of the six levels, teacher candidates go through the three stages described above: observation, participation, and evaluation (Barahmeh, 2016). The study described in this paper is focused on three sections of practicum 5, wherein teacher candidates have 90 hours of contact within a school.

The course is divided into theoretical and practical components, with 16 hours spread over the semester. The theoretical sessions take place at the university to examine theory connected to practicum and teaching techniques and procedures. The course also includes 90 hours spent by student teachers in practical education schools under the supervision of academic supervisors and teacher mentors. Students go through the three levels of practicum observation, partial teaching, and entire teaching, just as in any other practicum course. This teaching of skills in each level covers all aspects of the educational environment, such as designing and implementing a unit of study, classroom management, teaching tactics, student evaluation, creating instructional aids, and the use of educational technology. Within this level, the student-teacher implements various classroom circumstances by teaching a full day, serving as a support teacher, and assisting the mentor teacher in following up with students to accomplish classroom activities.

PARTICIPANTS

This study focuses on three sections of a practicum course for teacher candidates who are in their third- and fourth-year curriculum of their undergraduate degrees. Table 1 presents information on the number of students and their majors across three sections of the practicum course for teacher candidates.

Table 1. Practicum Course Sections, Number of Students, and Majors

| Practicum Course Sections | Number of Students | Majors |
|---------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Section 1 | 31 | Teaching Lower Elementary Grades, English Language Teaching, Other Teaching Methods |
| Section 2 | 20 | Teaching Lower Elementary Grades, English Language Teaching, Other Teaching Methods |
| Section 3 | 20 | Teaching Lower Elementary Grades, English Language Teaching, Other Teaching Methods |
| Total | 71 | |

RESEARCH DESIGN

Creswell and Clark (2018) stress the strength of mixed-method exploratory research designs in achieving broader understanding of an investigated topic. This study adopts a mixed-method approach that combined quantitative data from questionnaire responses with qualitative data interviews. The quantitative questionnaire responses will help answer the second research question focused on students' five perceptions in the practicum drawn from a reflective notebook compiled during the course. I expect this approach will incorporate the strengths of both data collection methods while removing their limitations (Creswell and Clark, 2018).

The qualitative aspect of the research was for the richness and nuance in-depth interviews (Farrah, 2019) would offer researchers to help them address the "how and why" issues. The semi-structured interview used ensured the responses would address the research topics and help determine how teacher candidates perceive their reflective journal writing experiences in practicum courses.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The mixed-method research design relied on responses and interviews from a questionnaire that was created based on the my examination of the literature. I created an appropriate questionnaire to understand students' perceptions and experiences using the reflective response diary. Farrah's (2012) study and other literature affected the construction of the questionnaire statements. The questionnaire contained 30 statements graded on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree).

Two experts from An-Najah University's Faculty of Education verified the content validity of the questionnaire. The two experts provided feedback on the questionnaire format and statement structure. The necessary revisions were made and put into the final questionnaire based on their suggestions.

To further understand the experiences of the 71 study participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 of them, which was sufficient to reach saturation. The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were guided by an interview protocol that covered the following topics related to the research question:

1. How did teacher candidates receive journal writing?
2. What are the perceived benefits and difficulties in writing reflective journaling, if any?
3. What is the impact of reflective journal writing on teacher candidates?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The teacher candidates were told on the first day they would be expected to write response journals throughout the course and submit a reflective journal. I met with the three teacher candidate sections in the first course meeting (I was also the practicum course instructor), and after an in-depth discussion the candidates stated their concerns about and benefit objectives for the course. The candidates mentioned that they were unsure of what to focus on while at school, and so I saw this as an ideal chance to convey the concept of reflection to the teacher candidates through journal writing and daily diaries.

Burton's (2009) explanation of the reflective writing process served as a guide for the research. Because students had never written nor heard of reflective journals, I decided that a response diary would be an excellent tool (Burton, 2009; Dunlap, 2006). This kind of reflective journal would guide their attention and focus during observations and help them find difficulties would they encounter. I spent six hours instructing the candidates on the reflective writing process, and how to make the most of their time in their school settings.

I then asked the teacher candidates guided questions to help them stay focused, which was especially important given their lack of expertise with reflective writing. These guided questions might aid teacher candidates in focusing their attention during school visits. According to Abu Alainin (2018), guided journals can create better critical reflection by redirecting reflection away from the natural drive toward emotional release. These guided diaries are more structured and targeted in terms of the insights gained on instructional methods.

The participants' ethical clearance was requested at the conclusion of the semester after they had submitted their journals. I explained to the teacher candidates that their participation was completely voluntary, and they were free to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering to avoid bias in their answers. I also assured them that their involvement would have no bearing on their academics or final grades.

The participants completed a questionnaire after giving their consent to engage in this research. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in Arabic. Pertinent quotations were translated from Arabic to English.

DATA ANALYSIS

The survey data were analyzed using the statistical software package SPSS 21, and the data collected from the respondents was described and

summarized using descriptive statistics. Other statistical analytic techniques, such as a T-test, were employed to examine the effect of teacher candidates' gender on their perceptions and experiences while reflective journaling. A one-way analysis of variance test was used to determine the effect of specialization and general practitioner characteristics on their replies and perceptions.

As I was also the instructor and oversaw the study and course processes, the interview replies were coded and categorized during data analysis. The procedure improved the interpretation of the data and the conclusions drawn from the discussion as well as the summarization of the findings. I developed the codes based on the recurrence of certain words and thoughts (Creswell, 2003). Following Rossman and Rallis (2003), I employed eight steps in data analytic process to include an immersive approach of listening to the recorded interviews, taking notes, and compiling a verbatim transcription of the interviews in Arabic. I used manual analysis to determine initial codes by rereading the entire transcribed data set, taking marginal notes as part of the preliminary analysis, and then structuring the data into concise themes that made sense of the reported experiences and appropriately addressed the study's research objectives (Creswell & Clark, 2018)

The transcription and translation from Arabic to English were done by me. I then had a bilingual colleague verify the accuracy of the translation to guarantee data quality. Researchers who perform qualitative insider research and translate their own data are better equipped to analyze cross-language data (Abalkhail, 2018). According to Abalkhail (2018), being an insider qualitative researcher and translating the research data as a researcher is an opportunity for close attention to specific points in the text that can add value to the analysis by improving the validity of interpretations.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the validity of cross-language, qualitative research is a challenge to researchers, and the translation of qualitative data may introduce an additional layer of bias in data production. I drew on Guba and Lincoln's work for the trustworthiness and authenticity criteria for judging the quality of the study and to guarantee reliable and valid data. Creating a trustworthy account requires four principles: trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Several methods were used in this study, including audio recording, taking notes, and consulting a native bilingual colleague with education and teaching method background.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As this is a mixed-methods study, this section summarizes and discusses each discovery by first providing numeric data and then the qualitative interpretations. The primary research topic for this study is teacher candidates' perception of their experiences writing reflective journals during their practicum semester and the benefits they get from the reflective notebook process. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the questionnaire items to help answer the research questions. The estimated averages and standard deviations of the items are shown in Table 2. An asterisk is used to identify negative statements which are on a reversed scale. The responses to negatively stated items ($n = 4$) were inverted so that the highest response score indicated a favorable opinion of each statement for all items. Again, candidates were asked to evaluate the statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1).

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation for the Complete Statements of the Questionnaire

| No | Statement | M | SD |
|----|---|------|-----|
| 1 | A reflective diary helped me talk about my experiences. | 4.09 | .84 |
| 2 | A reflective diary has helped me express my thoughts and opinions. | 4.06 | .86 |
| 3 | A reflective diary helped me respond to my thoughts and feelings. | 3.88 | .84 |
| 4 | A reflective diary stimulated my critical thinking skills. | 3.90 | .94 |
| 5 | A reflective diary stimulated my creativity. | 3.88 | .88 |
| 6 | A reflective diary is a way of thinking about exploring my learning. | 3.94 | .86 |
| 7 | A reflective diary is an opportunity to gain self-knowledge. | 3.96 | .93 |
| 8 | A reflective diary has helped me understand what I am learning. | 3.97 | .87 |
| 9 | A reflective diary has helped me understand what I see in class. | 4.02 | .89 |
| 10 | A reflective diary has helped me connect what I learn in lectures to what I see in schools. | 4.03 | .80 |
| 11 | A reflective diary enables me to describe what I understand. | 4.03 | .85 |
| 12 | A reflective diary allows me to develop and enhance my writing skills. | 4.03 | .73 |
| 13 | A reflective diary enhances my communication skills. | 3.79 | .80 |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued

| | | | |
|----|--|------|------|
| 14 | A reflective diary motivates me to engage in practical education and classroom observations. | 4.00 | .73 |
| 15 | *I did not understand what to write in a reflective diary. | 3.51 | 1.11 |
| 16 | *I did not have enough time to write in a reflective diary. | 3.22 | 1.18 |
| 17 | *A reflective diary is a waste of time. | 3.88 | 1.23 |
| 18 | *I learned nothing from writing in a reflective diary. | 3.88 | 1.20 |
| 19 | Writing in a reflective diary should be encouraged and continued. | 3.90 | .93 |
| 20 | I would like to share with my colleagues what I write in the reflective diaries. | 3.45 | .96 |
| 21 | A reflective diary has helped me combine my teaching methodologies. | 3.63 | .84 |
| 22 | A reflective diary has helped me distinguish between what I know and what I need to know. | 3.96 | .89 |
| 23 | Reflective diaries are helpful for practicum courses. | 3.94 | .99 |
| 24 | The reflective diary has given me ideas for planning what I will teach in the next lesson. | 3.88 | .94 |
| 25 | A reflective diary has helped me make my teaching more effective. | 3.81 | .92 |
| 26 | I apply reflective diary writing in all my academic courses. | 2.99 | 1.11 |
| 27 | I only write reflective diaries when asked to do so. | 3.49 | 1.05 |
| 28 | My reflective writing practice helps me set future goals. | 3.78 | .83 |
| 29 | I make better decisions and steps based on my reflective writing practices. | 3.76 | .83 |
| 30 | Overall, the experience of daily reflective writing was well worth the effort. | 3.97 | 1.02 |

*Indicates reversed items.

As indicated in Table 2, teacher candidates' overall reflective journal writing experience assessment is favorable and well worth the effort. The interviews (with 25 participants, all conducted in Arabic) showed the positive perspective was because journaling was a novel form of professional practice to them. As one teacher candidate stated during the interview, "This is the first time I've used a reflective journal in any of my practicum courses." Others commented similarly, noting, "This is my first time writing a reflective paper in which I describe what I've seen and then comment on and evaluate it."

Positive perceptions are associated with the type and purpose of reflective diaries. As shown in the interviews, writing reflective diaries helped

teacher candidates remain focused, because it compelled them to observe other teachers more intently. Several participants remarked upon this aspect of the process, noting:

Student 1: "Prior to using reflective diaries, we were daydreaming and paying little attention to the classes we observed. This reflective journal aided in our concentration."

Student 2: "Keeping honest reflection diaries was an important step we took throughout the practicum. Because before this phase, we went to school, sat in classrooms, saw teachers, and were frequently bored. However, reflective journals compelled us to pick up a pen and a piece of paper and record our observations within classes, comment on them, adapt to what was positive and avoid negative."

As a researcher and instructor of the course, I find it beneficial to understand teacher candidates' perceptions of reflective diaries. Assigning teacher candidates to a response journal aided their concentration, as they had never seen reflective journaling previously. It accomplishes its assigned objective throughout the practical course. According to Alt and Raichel (2020), employing unstructured reflective journaling presents substantial challenges, posing questions to establish a routine practice of assessing experience and planning. It may also function as a scaffold that guides students through the reflective process.

Reflective journaling is an essential tool for bridging the gap between theory and practice: "Reflective diary helped me in discussing my experience" (mean = 4.09). It helps teachers analyze their thoughts and feelings: "The reflective diary has aided me in expressing my thoughts and opinions" (mean = 4.06). It makes connections between what is learned in class and how it pertains to their lives: "The reflective diary has helped me link what I learn in lectures to what I see in schools" (mean = 4.03).

These benefits were evident in other statements as well:

Student 1: "I've observed numerous issues with teachers' behavior. Several of these issues include intimidation of students, a failure to listen, and a failure to comprehend concerns. For instance, a student was a great achiever but also hyperactive. Every class, the teacher asks her to stand next to the board, holding her book, and she continues to participate and answer the questions. I was not a fan of that and advised the teacher to search for other ways to resolve the issue."

This story of a teacher candidate demonstrates how reflective journals allow them to practice reflection in their practicum and develop more profound and individualized ideas on how to employ consciousness and knowledge in their classroom.

Stephen Brookfield mentioned the critical incident lens in the second lens of reflection, which involves analyzing a specific event or situation to determine what went wrong and why (Brookfield, 1995). This perspective was evident in one of the attendees, who is studying English Education:

Student 1: "Reflective diaries helped me notice things I would have overlooked otherwise. As a result, when I observe, I make notes on some of the observations I think I should avoid when teaching and assisted me in recognizing things that I would have missed otherwise. A sixth-grade teacher for example, frequently interrupts students when they talk, preventing them from finishing their sentences. What the teacher does is incorrect; how will students learn from her mistakes? Teachers should give students opportunities to speak and practice speaking."

Instructor: So, before reflective journals, you would not have noticed that?

Student 1: "No, it helped me focus more on the details."

Considering Brookfield's four lenses, the teacher candidates claimed journal writing helped them become more reflective and critical. The questionnaire results indicated the statement "Reflective diary boosted my critical thinking skills" had a relatively high average of 3.90. Teacher candidates' comments emphasized the value of this tool. For example, "It encouraged critical thinking, an important component of reflective journaling. Reflective journaling encourages us to think about what happened in class, change it, and improve if possible. If something bad happens, we look for methods to make it better" (Student 1) and through reflective journaling "analyzed what I witnessed and expressed my view on those techniques, as well as what I would do in her shoes" (Student 2).

Individuals can use reflective journaling to track their progress over time. Teachers who write down their thoughts and emotions on a regular basis can look back at previous entries and see how far they have progressed (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019). This gives them the opportunity to reflect on their performance because the records help them make logical and practical decisions about what to do in specific situations (Khanjani, et al., 2018).

Comments included this telling statement:

Student 1: "By recording your notes, you ensure that you will not forget them because they are in your handwriting. Later on, as you read and reread it, you may discover details that make you question how you did it that way. As a result, it aids in tracking your progress."

These critical thinking and evaluation skills will aid teacher candidates in their future teaching planning. "Reflective journaling helped me in planning a whole class in which I evaluate the positive aspects of what I saw

and avoid the downsides” (Student 1). “After graduation, when I become a teacher, I will use this reflective paper as an evaluation tool to encourage students to share their thoughts and opinions about my teaching and the strategies I will employ” (Student 2).

The results show reflective journaling assists teacher candidates in improving their teaching by identifying the negatives and positives of teaching practices and the influence this has on students. This is explained by one of the teacher candidates:

“Reflective journaling helped me focus on the elements I needed to incorporate into my teaching and the elements I needed to avoid; I considered this when planning for teaching, and as a result, I used different methods when teaching an entire, complete class; I received positive feedback from my professor, and the school principal noticed when they came to evaluate my teaching.”

Journaling also aided teacher candidates in developing and enhancing their writing ability. The teacher candidates registered strong agreement with the statement (item 12 of the questionnaire) “A reflective diary enables me to grow and strengthen my writing abilities” (average = 4.03). This point was underlined repeatedly during the teacher candidate’s interviews:

Student 1: “I recoded my observation notes in English, which aided my English writing skills and vocabulary.”

How did it help?

Student 1: “When I need to write their specific terms in my journal, I check them to ensure this specific term suits this context. As a result, I ended up with a lengthy list of terms and concepts and their possible applications. Additionally, writing aided me in developing my sentence structure.”

These findings corroborate Kim’s (2018) assertion that journaling aided in the development of students’ vocabulary, as some students spent time using search engines and dictionaries to look up English words. As pointed out by Tuan (2010), using English to write journals in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situation is an exercise that can contribute greatly to the development of language ability.

In general, and based on their replies to interviews and the questionnaire, teacher candidates’ embraced the journal writing experience and the use of response diaries to foster a reflective approach to teaching and learning. Although they were unfamiliar with the reflective diary, teacher candidates recognized the benefits and importance of establishing a thoughtful disposition while learning to teach:

Student 1: "Certainly, it is pleasant, but much depends on the student. Personally, I like it and benefited from it, therefore I would not object to recreating it."

Student 2: "To be completely honest, I wrote the reflection paper because it was assigned to us. However, after observing the effect on our practicum performance, I became inspired and driven to do so."

A primary justification for reflective practice is the realization that merely accumulating experience is insufficient for acquiring knowledge; instead, it is necessary to actively reflect on that knowledge to grow from it. In practice-based professional learning environments, where individuals learn from their own professional experience as opposed to formal learning or information transfer, reflective practice can be a useful technique. It is potentially the single most useful resource for advancing one's career. The ability to see and name patterns of thought and theory in the context of one's work is a key benefit of reflective practice, which is also essential in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Because it encourages students to think critically and regulate their own behavior, self-reflection and reflective writing play a crucial role in helping students gain a firm grasp of topics and become more competent and professional.

Educators who value reflection are particularly important in the Palestinian context. It is imperative that teacher education programs in Palestine offer teacher candidates the opportunity to enhance their degree of reflection and emphasize the relevance of reflective thought to improving the quality of educational programs. Teacher preparation also should provide an atmosphere conducive to developing candidates' reflective practice, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical disposition.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher candidates' experiences with reflective journals during their fifth practicum (of six) at An-Najah University in Nablus, Palestine. I discovered that teacher candidates enjoy journal writing for reflective practice and that it adds to their individual growth. The findings indicate reflective journal writing is an excellent tool for assisting teacher candidates in developing professional knowledge, constructing their identities, beliefs, and metaphors, which may bring with them a plethora of experiences, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher candidates regarded reflective journals as a pleasurable experience that aided in the organization of their thoughts and the connection of theory to practice (Afzali, 2018). Their experiences with

reflective journals substantiate Boud's (2001) assertion that journal writing can be interpreted as a kind of self-expression, a record of occurrences, or a type of therapy, and can be an excellent tool to prepare candidates for the field of teaching (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019).

Reflective journaling practices, when applied in Palestinian settings where people, including teachers and students, face challenges and hardships, can be a powerful tool for them to record their experiences and emotions. Reflective journaling can assist Palestinians in processing their emotions, gaining insight into their thoughts and feelings, and developing a better grasp of themselves and their surroundings. It can also be used to document the everyday struggles of living in an occupied territory, such as movement restrictions, a lack of essential services, and human rights violations. Furthermore, reflective journaling can provide a forum for people to share their experiences with others to increase awareness of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories.

This study must be viewed in light of its scope and limitation. It was conducted in particular classes handled by one researcher/instructor and depended on reflection details provided by one group of teacher candidates. Accordingly, replicating this study with a larger learning cohort and different courses could help validate the findings.

The research findings revealed several strategies that could be used to guarantee the successful implementation of reflective journaling in pre-service teacher education programs. First, faculty members should establish clear standards for what should be included in the journals and how frequently they should be written. Faculty members should also provide guidance on how to successfully express thoughts and feelings about teaching through writing. They should also foster an atmosphere in which students feel safe sharing their thoughts without fear of judgement or criticism.

Finally, this study brings attention to reflective writing as a method in teacher preparation and poses questions that may require further investigation such as the longer-term application of this tool among in-service teachers and whether they will continue to use it after they enter the field.

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