

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

A 'MY CHARACTER' REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham is a unique and leading centre for the examination of how character and virtues impact on individuals and society. Through its research and development projects, the Centre works directly with schools, practitioners, and academics.

Character Education

Character education can be considered an umbrella term which includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop personal positive strengths called virtues.

About the Research

This research briefing draws on the insights of 25 primary and 12 secondary trainee teachers from two UK universities who successfully completed a reflective journal activity during their second teaching placement. 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted with these volunteers. The research aimed to discover if reflection on personal character strengths had an impact on trainee teachers whilst on teaching placement. The research was conducted as part of the Jubilee Centre's current project on [Teacher Education](#).

Background

There is a growing trend for members of the teaching profession to describe the goal of teacher education in terms of reflective practice, yet the commonly used term currently does not have a clear definition which all in the profession can agree upon. The model of the 'reflective practitioner', originally proposed by Schön (1983), is widely used across the teaching profession. This model acknowledges that reflection is important to the professional role of a teacher, although this description of the 'reflective practitioner' has recently been critiqued (Higgins, 2001). Schön's approach of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action has led to criticism that this form of reflection, if undertaken by teachers, is often too narrow and leads many practitioners to translate reflection and reflective practice into solely technical prescriptions (Kelchtermans, 2009).

To ensure reflection plays a greater role in the effectiveness of teaching strategies, it has been argued that reflection should be seen as a deeper and broader concept which encompasses moral, political and emotional dimensions (Thompson and Pascal, 2012). During reflection, questions of meaning and technique should be considered within an ethical context and teachers should attempt to look beneath the surface of a

given situation to see what assumptions are being made and importantly what thoughts, feelings and values are being drawn upon (Beauchamp, 2015). Reflection in teaching, then, amongst other criteria, must also incorporate reflection on the character of the teacher and how a teacher's character also shapes the character of students.

Reflective practice has been acknowledged as a key component of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (McKenzie, 2015), with many ITE programmes incorporating reflection into their course. However, the effectiveness and forms of adoption are often limited by the technical nature of the ITE programmes to begin with (Loughran, 2002). It is recognised that teacher educators seek to cultivate reflective practitioners; however, there is no consensus on how this is achieved, and what this actually looks like (Gadsby and Cronin, 2012). It has been suggested that while trainee teachers are required to reflect on lessons and teaching placements throughout their training, in the face of demanding timetables and competence criteria, trainee teachers do not generally reflect on the character values dimension of teaching (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005).

In teaching practice, reflections that occur spontaneously tend to be momentary, fleeting and intuitive with no long-term benefit. The use of journals as a reflective tool allows the user to focus on ongoing issues over time with the intention that they may develop 'good' classroom practices (Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman, 2018). The use of reflective journals has been shown to be valued by trainee teachers in providing them with an opportunity to relate theory and practice (McKenzie, 2015) whilst also offering a holistic view of their development as a teacher (Arthur, Davison and Lewis, 2005). The process of completing a reflective journal accentuates favourable conditions for learning, as it provides an intellectual space in which trainee teachers can focus and order thoughts to make sense of situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ITE PROVIDERS

- To provide a definition of reflective practice for trainee teachers which actively encourages reflection on the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching.
- To provide real-life examples of how character strengths may be used, seen and reflected on in school placements.
- To provide trainee teachers with the time and space to reflect on their character development and character strengths where appropriate.
- To include reflection on character and character strengths within current reflection or evaluation tools that are used by trainee teachers whilst on teaching placements.



The My Character Journal

The purpose of the My Character Journal was to aid trainees in reflecting on their character and the character strengths which they observed to be most influential to them throughout their teaching placement. It was recommended that time be taken at the end of each day to read through the 24 character strengths present in the journal and decide which three character strengths were most influential in their experience of that day. At the end of each week, trainees were provided with a Weekly Reflection section where they could write as little or as much as they felt comfortable, whilst also highlighting three character strengths to focus on developing in the following week.

Key Findings from the Research

The 37 interviews with volunteer trainee teachers were transcribed and analysed via coding in NVivo.

Impact on classroom practice: There was a consensus amongst trainee teachers that using the My Character Journal directly impacted upon their classroom practice and therefore their interactions with students. Several trainees commented on how reflecting daily on their character strengths had enabled them to develop inspiring character-based goals for their students. Trainees also observed how reflecting on character through the journal had led them to introduce the language of character into their teaching, particularly when dealing with behavioural issues.

Impact on personal development: 34 trainee teachers described how using the My Character Journal directly impacted upon their own personal development. Trainees discussed how reflecting on their own character provided the tools to look at their strengths, whereas other forms of reflection present on their ITE courses often focussed on their weaknesses. They also reported that reflection on character allowed a more direct focus on how their character impacts upon students. Trainees commented that daily reflection on their character challenged them to think about questions such as: who am I? What teacher do I want to be? What do I want to achieve? and ultimately made them question what makes a 'good' teacher.

Positive outlook: The majority of trainee teachers spoke positively about their experience of completing the journal, with nearly a third speaking in highly positive terms about how reflecting on their character enabled them to have a positive outlook on difficult days. Trainees explained how the daily process of reflecting on their character acted as a 'de-stresser' and released some of the pressure they felt in being on teaching placement.

Trainee suggestions: Trainee teachers made recommendations or suggestions about how this form of reflection might be encouraged more during a school-based placement on ITE. Most commonly, trainee teachers wanted greater input, via their ITE course, on character and how character strengths present themselves whilst on teaching placement. Trainees also recommended that it would be beneficial if such reflection was not viewed as a separate undertaking, but was included within their standard university-based weekly

evaluations. Trainees also thought they should be given more autonomy and should be able to highlight as few or as many character strengths as they wanted for each day.

Obstacles: Ten trainee teachers noted there were obstacles in their capability to complete the reflective journal, with the most common concern being that they did not have time due to their workload.

TEACHER EDUCATION RESOURCES

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/TeacherEducationResources

- My Character Journal
- Character education lecture for both primary and secondary ITE courses with accompanying teaching notes

References:

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Zulfikar, T. and Mujiburrahman (2018) Understanding own teaching: becoming reflective teachers through reflective journals, *Reflective Practice*, 19:1, p1-13.

Find Out More

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