"Field Placement" –
A Tool for Reflection in Language Teacher Training

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Abstract

Students wishing to become teachers of languages in Malta are required to follow the Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) course offered by the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta. The two-year full-time post graduate course, which enables graduates to teach at Secondary level, according to the language of specialisation chosen, combines theory and practice by means of a Field Placement in schools throughout the 2 years of the course. This comprises a period of observation sessions in schools held once weekly, during which, with the help of a Teacher Mentor, student teachers are expected to discuss the different practices observed, followed by a five-week block practicum period in each of the two years of the course, giving particular attention to preparation and planning, reflective practice, professional skills and professional development. The Field Placement goes hand in hand with the Themes in Education interdisciplinary programme with the aim of fostering reflective inquiry and professional practice by helping student teachers focus on a number of issues and challenges which teachers have to deal with in their everyday work.

Keywords: *Field Placement; Reflective Practice; Teacher Mentors; Teaching Practice.*

1. Introduction

Teaching has undoubtedly become one of the most complicated jobs in today's world. Teachers are not simply tasked with forming the citizens of tomorrow (which in itself is a mammoth task) but, above all, to be agents of change in classrooms that are characterised by diverse populations and which in turn present multilingual and multicultural challenges. Pace (2016) [1] argues that this diversity in the language classroom makes teachers' work difficult since cultural diversity poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators. Teachers as well as students bring into the classroom their own personal cultures, institutional cultures, and even cultures from specific social realities, and it is no easy challenge for the teacher to somehow integrate all this into a "class culture" to produce an environment that is conducive to learning. Teachers, according to Pace (2015) [2], need to be knowledgeable about how students coming from different countries, backgrounds and life experiences perceive the world and how they process the language/s and intercultural aspects being taught in class.

This means that future teachers are to be prepared not only with knowledge in their discipline but also with the ability to assume multiple roles in a multi-cultural society. This also explains why student teachers and newly qualified teachers consider classroom management to be the biggest challenge they have to face. Many, if not most of novice teachers complain that their teacher training University course did little to prepare them for the realities of different classroom situations, including dealing with diverse and, at times, unruly students, and often feel overwhelmed once they enter class. Another big challenge is how to motivate low achievers and get them on board. Classes are very often made up of students with differing interests, abilities, skills and knowledge. For this reason, one size does not fit all and teachers have to find a way of meeting the variety of needs they are confronted with. Technology may seem to be the answer, but one has to not just know how to use the technologies available but, above all, how to make the best use of them in class for the benefit of the students. Consequently, teaching demands broad knowledge of subject matter, curriculum and standards; enthusiasm, a caring attitude, and a love of learning; knowledge of discipline and classroom management techniques, and much more. With all these qualities required, it is no wonder that teacher training has become a very difficult mission to accomplish, even more so if our aim as teacher trainers is to make of our student teachers reflective practitioners.

2. Reflective Practice

Impedovo and Khatoon Malik (2016) [3] argue that the objective of reflective practice in teaching is to ensure a more precise and meaningful understanding of a situation and to provide effective, applicable actions for strengthening performance. This embraces the concept of the teacher as a learner and the

teacher as a professional. Every teacher has a professional responsibility to reflect and evaluate his/her practice in order to be able to identify how to improve the quality of pupils' learning. Reflection inspires teachers to evaluate what happened and why; it encourages teachers to try out new ideas and promote changes in pupils' learning behaviour. Being reflective allows one to take a step back, look more holistically and try and understand both the success and potential failings of a lesson, a situation or a way of doing something. Unfortunately, some, if not many, individuals looking to get into the teaching profession still do not realise that being a good teacher does no longer merely mean having a sound understanding of the subject matter that one would like to teach. Teaching is much more than this. Teachers need more than ever before engage with their students, ask the right questions, motivate students to learn in a way that lasts, and above all they need to be able to look at their own abilities and the way that they connect with their students. Teachers need not only understand well what they do in class but also why they do it. In other words, they have to be reflective practitioners and be able to use critical reflections to improve instruction by identifying weaknesses and strengths and improving their practice.

Reflective teaching implies a systematic process of collecting, recording and analysing one's own thoughts and observations, as well as those of the students in class, that will then lead to making changes. It is a cyclical process through which, once changes start being implemented, the reflective and evaluative cycle is activated, leading to reflections on whether we need to do something in a different way or simply decide that what we are doing is, in fact, the best way of doing it. And this, after all, is what professional development is all about and explains why teacher educators should facilitate the reflection process and promote opportunities for student teachers to engage in reflective conversations and reflect on their teaching experiences. Pace (2014) [4] argues that encouraging reflective practice is important for preparing thinking practitioners who show that they can adapt to new technologies, new standards, and new environments. Orland-Barak & Yinon (2007) [5] on their part, perceive the emphasis on reflective practice as an attempt to merge theory and practice in teacher education. Reflection is a highly valued attribute of effective teachers, for without the disposition to reflect on their performance, teachers are less likely to improve their practice or to be able to see the links between theory and practice. To enhance competence and improve professional development, teachers must reflect critically on the actions performed in instruction. Miyata (2002) [6] argues that it is only when teachers reflect that they enhance the repertoire of pedagogical knowledge, whereas with regards to prospective teachers this has to be backed up also by feedback provided by their mentors and/or university supervisors. Reflective teaching means looking at what one does in the classroom, thinking about why s/he does it, and thinking about if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in the classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, the student teacher identifies and explores his/her own practices and underlying beliefs.

3. The Field Placement

Several studies show how the single most important factor determining the quality of the education a child receives is the quality of his teacher. In many countries, a person who wishes to become a teacher must first obtain specified professional qualifications or credentials from a university or college. In Malta the path to obtaining a teacher's qualification and warrant is through the Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) course offered by the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta. It is a 2-year full time course intended to offer an entry-level qualification for teachers, based on the study of pedagogy with the ultimate aim of offering student teachers the chance to collaborate with mentors and other colleagues in a process of growth and development from a prospective teacher to a reflective practitioner. The MTL places Field Placement at the core of the two-year professional Master course, with student-teachers having ongoing and meaningful experiences in schools and other learning settings. It comprises a period of observation and teaching in schools and/or other educational settings, under supervision, in each of the two years of the course. Every student teacher is, at the start of the course, assigned to a particular school. Here, for the duration of the whole academic year, s/he is expected to spend a whole day per week observing the Teacher Mentor and other teachers within the school and discussing the different practices observed. Gradually the student teacher starts taking up activities and lessons, always under the guidance of the Teacher Mentor, in preparation for the Block Teaching Practice or the so-called Practicum. This consists of a five-week block teaching practice period in each of the two years of the course, giving particular attention to preparation and planning, reflective practice, professional skills and professional development. The Field Placement goes hand in hand with the Themes in Education interdisciplinary programme with

the aim of fostering reflective inquiry and professional practice by helping student teachers focus on a number of issues and challenges which teachers have to deal with in their everyday work.

As stated in the Field Placement Handbook, the Themes in Education Programme together with the Block Practicum play a pivotal role in the MTL programme as they provide student teachers the opportunity to explore the various challenges and issues of professional practice in actual school and classroom situations. The student teachers are divided in small tutorial groups. Each theme is presented and discussed over 2 tutorial sessions, one held before the observation session in school whereas the other tutorial is held the week after. The field placement, as stated in the handbook, encourages student teachers "to develop a reflective attitude towards issues of professional practice….. and to adopt the role of a reflective observer, drawing on theoretical insights in order to make pedagogical sense of the varieties of experiences that arise and are constructed within a school setting" (p.13). For this reason, a whole range of themes dealing with issues and challenges which teachers have to deal with as they go about their work are presented. These include, among others, topics like: Becoming a teacher; Schools as communities of learning; Social and cultural diversity; Creating positive classroom climates; Challenging/meaningful behavior; Student teacher relationships; Working in teams with other professionals; Developing respectful schools and classrooms; Language across the curriculum; Parents and parental involvement; Promoting a Sustainable Society.

The main scope of the Field Placement is to help student teachers develop a process of thinking about one's practice before, during and after the concrete activities. As Collin, Karsenti & Komis (2013) [7] state, "reflective practice means that reflection, whether abstract or concrete, can never be disconnected from the situation that produces it" (p. 106). For this to happen, the student teacher needs not only to dedicate a large amount of time in planning and thinking about what s/he wants to realise, but, more importantly s/he needs to reflect to see if s/he is on the right track, what are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the decisions taken and the choices that were made, what could be improved, what hasn't worked and why. Such reflective practices help student teachers become more aware of themselves, of their beliefs and prejudices and of the surroundings in which they work. Together with the Teacher Mentor and the University Supervisors the student teacher reflects on his personal characteristics and discusses ideas, opinions and experiences in order to improve his practice.

This should lead the pre-service teacher to develop critical reflection prior to being immersed in a hands-on teaching practice, consisting of a 5-week Block Practicum in Year 1 and Year 2 of the course. During the first two weeks of the practicum, it is recommended that the class teacher and/or the Teacher Mentor remain in the classroom with the student teacher, following which the student teacher assumes full responsibility and manages the class on his/her own. Throughout this 5-week period, discussions between the student teacher and his/her mentor are ongoing. When and if possible, the Teacher Mentor is also present in class during the Faculty Examiners' visits as well as in the post-visit feedback sessions. The main scope is to encourage student teachers practise reflective thinking in the practicum setting as this enables them to seek for ways to improve their practice and consequently have a positive effect on their students. At the start of the practicum, most student teachers' reflective skills are focused on their performance as teachers and on self-survival, but with the help of the Teacher Mentors, student teachers are guided so as to focus and direct their reflections on the students' learning. This is further enhanced by the nature of the practicum assessment criteria, where importance is not only given to the classroom 'performance' of the student teacher, but also to the ability to reflect on his/her teaching experience.

The assessment sheets used during the practicum provide evidence of the students' progress and consist of a number of competences which a student is expected to achieve, giving the opportunity to Faculty Examiners to provide qualitative feedback to each and every student. The assessment sheet is made up of 4 main sections, namely Preparation and planning; Documentation and evidence of reflective practice; Professional skills; and Professional attitude and development. Great importance is given to pedagogically sound lesson plans, with specific and well-articulated learning outcomes. Lesson plans must also include cooperative learning strategies and reflect learners' diversity, including any necessary adaptations and/or modifications to suit learners' needs.

The second section of the assessment sheets is dedicated to documentation and evidence of reflective practice and focuses mainly on 2 aspects, namely class and student profiles and self-evaluations. Student teachers are required to write the profile of each class they teach, focusing particularly on student needs, levels of ability, challenges, the physical environment and targets set. They are also asked to identify a number of students from each class they teach and draw up their profiles, giving particular attention to their strengths, interests and needs. They are then asked to

identify any learning challenges they perceive in any of the students and to develop individual targets accordingly. Such profiles should help the student teacher better understand the students in class by identifying and noting their strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. Profiles are developed in the context of particular learning goals, so that the student teacher can determine which student qualities may pose challenges or offer special opportunities for learning to take place in class. Student teachers are also expected to write self-evaluation reports. These can either be done after each lesson or at the end of the week, depending on the subject/s being taught, the number of classes and other considerations and as decided with the respective Faculty Examiner. In their self-evaluations, student teachers are expected to include information pertaining to their strengths and/or any weak points that they feel require further developments. Such reports are to show an in-depth insight into the teaching and learning progress and, above all, evidence of reflective practice, engaging with the literature, research and school policies. Self-evaluation reports are discussed with both the Teacher Mentor and the Faculty Examiner and include the setting of targets for improvement as well as strategies on how to achieve them.

In the third section, focus is on professional skills which include knowledge of curriculum and of the subject taught, the teaching and learning process, learning outcomes, assessment, classroom organization and management and the use of resources and digital technologies. It is of fundamental importance that student teachers not only have a good knowledge of the curriculum and a satisfactory understanding of subject-matter knowledge, but that they also understand the context in which learning is taking place. In this way it can be ensured that all learners in class actively participate in the lesson, putting in practice a variety of teaching strategies and integrating the appropriate digital technologies and resources in order to help students reach the desired learning outcomes. Effective assessment strategies and techniques are needed to verify if learning is actually taking place. Questioning techniques that assess learner understanding and learning, class based tasks, peer and self-assessment by students are all essential to help learners move forward in their learning.

The final section of the assessment sheets of the practicum is dedicated to student teacher's professional attitude and development. It is particularly important that student teachers adhere to the Practicum Code of Practice and that, when and if necessary, they react positively to criticism and heed the Faculty Examiner's advice. It is also necessary that student teachers show a professional attitude in the way they act, interact with authority, colleagues and learners, the way they dress and, above all, the way they portray themselves both within the school premises and outside.

Conclusion

Teachers need reflection not only to change their everyday routines within a classroom, but also to realize what problems are arising and how to deal with them. The Field Placement embraces the concept of the teacher as a learner and the teacher as a professional. It can be viewed as a space where student teachers can represent their unique conceptions of what it means to teach by analysing, discussing and evaluating their own teaching practices and professional growth whilst providing opportunities for deeper conversations and discussions with Faculty supervisors, with their Teacher Mentor, between themselves and with their peers about the art of teaching. It aims to help student teachers reflect and be able to identify how to improve their professional activity in order to improve the quality of pupils' learning, evaluate what happens in class and why it is happening, and it encourages them to try out new ideas and promote changes in pupils' learning behaviour.

As Zalipour (2015) [8] puts it, "Reflective practice for teaching is for those teachers who are disposed to think about their teaching practices, and are willing to put reflective practice into action. Reflective practice challenges teachers who have unquestioned assumptions about good teaching, and encourages them to examine themselves and their practices in the interest of continuous improvement" (p. 4). Indeed, a reflective approach to teaching brings about changes in the way teaching is usually perceived and the teacher's role in the process of teaching. It also encourages mentoring and peer mentoring partnerships that help support individual student teachers in reflecting on and describing their practice. Such a reflective approach to teaching involves changes in the way teaching is perceived as well as the teacher's role in the process of teaching since teachers themselves are invited to develop changes in attitudes and in the kind of support they provide to their students. As Olaya Mesa (2018) [9] sustains, "becoming critical about oneself means to analyze classroom outcomes and teaching procedures in a thoroughly and routinized way to reach specific objectives, including the improvement of the teaching practices" (p.155).

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