

ESTUDIOS SOBRE EDUCACIÓN

REVISTA SEMESTRAL DEL DEPARTAMENTO DE EDUCACIÓN. FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

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Steering a Drifting Ship: Improving the Preparation of First-Year Catholic School Teachers Through Self-Reflection

Patroneando un barco a la deriva: Mejorando la preparación de los maestros de los colegios católicos durante el primer año a través de la autorreflexión

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Abstract: Introduction: Longitudinal investigation on the impact of self-reflection on the practices of novice teachers in California Catholic schools. Materials and Methods: Initial questionnaire at the beginning of their second academic semester; second questionnaire, individual interview and video of participant teaching in class at the end of the aforementioned semester; focus group with participants at the end of their second academic year. Results: Modifications in the classroom resulting in the incorporation of students' interests to the preparation and delivery of lessons, increased use of cooperative groups and more directions prior to and during explanations. Discussion: Self-reflection should become an essential component in teachers' course-work.

Keywords: Self-reflection; Teacher preparation; Teacher practices; Catholic schools.

Resumen: Introducción: Investigación longitudinal sobre el impacto de la autorreflexión en las prácticas de nuevos maestros en escuelas católicas de California. Materiales y Métodos: Cuestionario inicial al principio del segundo semestre académico; segundo cuestionario, entrevista individual y video de participante enseñando en clase al final del mencionado semestre; grupo de discusión con participantes al final del segundo año académico. Resultados: Modificaciones en clase que dieron como resultado la incorporación de los intereses de los alumnos a la preparación y el desarrollo de las lecciones, una mayor utilización de grupos cooperativos y más instrucciones antes y durante las explicaciones. Discusión: La autorreflexión debería ser un componente esencial de los contenidos de las materias estudiadas por los maestros.

Palabras clave: Autorreflexión; Preparación de maestros; Prácticas de los maestros; Colegios católicos.

Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PLACE) is a 2-year teaching corps partnership between the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and Loyola Marymount University (LMU) offering individuals for whom teaching was not their original career of choice the opportunity to teach in under-resourced Los Angeles Archdiocesan schools while completing the requirements for a combined California teaching credential and academic degree at LMU (PLACE, 2011). In so doing PLACE provides Archdiocesan schools with teachers-in-training with expertise in various subject areas while offering its corps members (PLACERs) the opportunity to earn a salary and a degree in education at the end of their tenure.

As a required course in the aforementioned coursework, Methods in English Language Development and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English is designed to help PLACERs increase their effectiveness in the classroom by exposing them to methods of teaching second languages and strategies and activities aimed at helping students increase their second language skills. Pervading both the content of the course and its assignments is a powerful emphasis on self-reflection, aimed at instilling in PLACERs the need to evaluate their performance in order to improve their practices.

With these premises in mind, the present project investigated the impact of self-reflection on recent PLACERs enrolled in the aforementioned Methods course. More specifically, it attempted to shed light on the following research question: What is the impact of self-reflection on PLACERs' perceptions of teaching and learning and classroom practices?

INTRODUCTION

PLACE (Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education)

The critical teacher shortage affecting the United States since the beginning of the past decade (Quality Counts, 2000) has forced both the public and private school systems of the nation to double their efforts to recruit traditional teacher preparation program graduates while simultaneously developing alternative ways of enticing qualified individuals for whom teaching was not their original career of choice. Unable to escape this predicament, the Catholic school system has followed suit, establishing creative partnerships between various Archdioceses and local Catholic universities nationwide that offer interested individuals the opportunity to complete the requirements for both their state-approved preliminary teaching credential and a degree in education while concurrently teaching in archdiocesan schools. To date, 15 universities and 53 archdioceses have engaged in this effort, carried out

under the auspices of the University Consortium for Catholic Education. In California, the partnership between the Los Angeles Archdiocese and LMU is known as Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education.

PLACE applicants must possess a university degree, demonstrate a heart for service, have experience working with young people, show evidence of living their faith, and commit to living in community with other corps members (PLACE, 2011). Once admitted into the program, they enroll in two courses per semester at LMU, among them Introduction to Teaching and Learning, Educational psychology, Foundations of Catholic education, and second language acquisition theories and methods. In accordance with the conceptual framework of LMU's School of Education, the integration of theory and practice present in this coursework enables PLACERs to successfully apply the knowledge gained in class to their daily routines (Korthagen, 2009).

Self-Reflection

However, a noticeable absence in all but one course (Methods in ELD and SDAIE) in the aforementioned coursework is self-reflection. Self-reflection, an “approach to teaching in which teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching” (Richards and Lockhart, 1996, p. 1) is an essential component in teacher preparation programs because of its powerful impact on teachers’ decisions and adoption of different courses of action (Carter, 2008), as well as on the development of teachers’ capacity to step back and analyze the rationale for their teaching (Loughran, 2011). Additionally, the process helps novice teachers shift from an emphasis on self to teaching others (Ward & McCotter, 2004), develop more critical stances toward teaching (Bailey, 2006), reexamine accepted assumptions about the profession (Richards and Lockhart, 1996), seek more effective practices (Gun, 2011) and renew their commitment to the job (Louis, Marks and Kruse, 1996). In sum, self-reflection is a powerful contributor to teacher preparation because of its impact on so many facets of the profession.

Levels in Self-Reflection

According to Luttenberg and Bergen (2008), reflection may be conducted broadly and/or in depth. The former refers to the interior and exterior factors affecting teaching, among them its personal, cognitive, and moral dimensions. Thus, “for reflection to be most broad, it must encompass the teachers’ entire field of action, which includes the social and cultural context of teaching” (Luttenberg and Bergen,

2008, p. 544). On the other hand, deep reflection can be construed either as a technique or a constructive process, depending on its cyclic character or cumulative levels. This can hence be interpreted as “a succession of different phases or stages in the development of one and the same type of reflection or a hierarchy of different types of reflection” (Luttenberg and Bergen, 2008, p. 545). In other words, broad reflection refers to the content of the process while deep reflection refers to its nature.

Interestingly, two conflicting views are apparent in this regard. Thus, Shoffner (2009) thinks it necessary for teachers to engage in both levels of reflection in order to grow personally and professionally and broaden their concerns for equity and justice for those on the receiving end of their teaching. On the other hand, Schön (1987) suggests teachers initially engage in deep reflection to resolve the many problems associated to their practices. Incidentally, this was the intended level of self-reflection for the PLACERs participating in this project, which was designed to help them learn to think about the positive and negative aspects of their teaching (Gun, 2011), and thereby assess their “professional performance, particularly when it goes especially well or especially badly” (Wallace, 1991, p. 13).

Far from constituting a simple process, self-reflection possesses an intricate nature, involving a combination of critical thought, problem solving, personal knowledge and self-awareness (Chant, Heafner and Bennett, 2004), that makes it necessary for teachers to be coached in order to offer the intended results (Gun, 2011). This is especially critical for pre-service and novice teachers, faced with the task of not only having to learn to self-reflect but to make the process a staple in their professional lives. An excellent way of helping them accomplish this goal is to involve them in action research projects (Chant, Heafner and Bennett, 2004).

Action research can adopt many forms, yet is generally perceived as teachers' study of their classroom experiences and practices in order to improve their performance (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). Studies investigating practicing teachers conducting action research as part of their work in teacher education programs reveal the positive impact of this practice on their own teaching and on student learning (Johnson and Button, 2000; Sax and Fisher, 2001). White (2009), for example, examined the impact of self-reflection on different groups of student teachers using an iterative process to examine their practices. The process consisted of various stages revolving around their analysis of what went well, the reasons for student engagement or lack of thereof, and the changes they would introduce in their practices were they to teach the same lesson in the future. The findings of the research appeared to indicate the validity of the approach in helping student teachers integrate the theory learned in courses and the practice implemented in the classroom and receive adequate feedback from those listening to their insights during follow-

up discussion sessions. Implementing a similar model of action research was the intent of *Methods in ELD and SDAIE*, one of the courses in PLACERs' academic coursework at LMU.

Methods in ELD and SDAIE

Methods in ELD and SDAIE is a course aimed at familiarizing LMU's teacher education graduates with effective second language methods, strategies, and activities for second language learners. Hence, its content covers issues related to the implementation of the most widespread methods traditionally used to teach English to beginning second language learners as part of ELD, while introducing an instructor-developed framework to create well-organized lessons for intermediate and advanced second language learners as part of SDAIE.

In addition to this prescribed content, a regular course routine consists of the weekly presentation by the instructor of an activity aimed at helping second language learners develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. As a follow-up assignment, PLACERs must implement each activity in their own classrooms during the following week, gather samples of students' work, and reflect on their performance with their classmates during the next course meeting, following a "What did I teach?-Why?-How?-Changes and/or modifications for the future" format, adapted from Yost, Sentner, and Forlenza-Bailey's (2000) "What did I do?-What does it mean?-How might I do things differently?" sequence. This design allows PLACERs to openly state their reflections while receiving input from both the instructor and their own classmates, thereby strengthening the process (Bailey, 2006).

The assignment initially required PLACERs to implement each activity in their classrooms and turn in a written report at the beginning of the next course meeting, yet this procedure was recently modified to avoid its possible "journaling out" effect (Loughran, 2006). In other words, to prevent PLACERs from typing brief, superficial, summaries of their performance in lieu of more thorough reflection pieces as a result of their increasing tiredness as the semester progressed. Instead, PLACERs are currently required to implement all the activities in their classrooms and reflect on their performance orally with their classmates in discussion groups during a subsequent meeting. Additionally, they must videotape themselves microteaching¹ (Wallace, 1991) one of the activities, write their reflections on their

¹ Teaching technique requiring subjects to videotape themselves while teaching a 10-15 minute lesson. The videotape is generally later analyzed in class with classmates and instructor to receive feedback.

performance following the format described above, and analyze the content of the videotape and the reflection piece during an individual conference with the instructor at the end of the semester.

Videos in Teacher Education

The use of professional videos featuring exemplary teachers is a common strategy in teacher education (Harmer, 2007; Sherin and van Es, 2009). Instructors use these videos to demonstrate the actual application to the classroom of aspects of teaching that might be perceived as too theoretical otherwise (Gainsburg, 2009). Small group discussions generally follow, during which students discuss and comment on the situations presented on the tapes (Gainsburg, 2009). By and large, the purpose of the discussions is to develop students' reflective skills upon observing more accomplished peers (Melville, Fazio, Bartley and Jones, 2008) and justify their statements by pointing to relevant evidence of featured instructional decisions (Rich and Hannafin, 2009).

Yet, the use of videos in teacher education is not without controversy. In fact, two common criticisms ironically stemming from the very audience they are intended to help are the dissociation between the seemingly artificial settings portrayed in the tapes and viewers' perception of "real" classrooms (Toll, Niertstheimer, Lenski and Kolloff, 2004), as well as viewers' reticence to being told how to lead classrooms. The latter view is prevalent among novice teachers, whose concerns about classroom management skills tend to overshadow the learning of new ideas (Gainsburg, 2009). Former PLACERs in the teacher preparation program at LMU have consistently voiced similar criticisms when exposed to videos of exemplary practitioners; hence, the course instructor attempted to avoid this problem by making PLACERs the protagonists of their own videos.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Participants in the study were the 7 PLACERs enrolled in a recent Methods in ELD and SDAIE course at LMU as part of their combined M.A. in Elementary education/Multiple subject teaching credential. Two of them were male and 5 female, with ages ranging from 22 to 26 (average 23.9). They all had bachelor degrees in fields such as Sociology, Human Development, or Psychology, though none of them related to education. Six participants taught in elementary schools and one in middle school. This was the first teaching experience for all of them.

Instruments

The first instrument was a questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first one enquired on PLACERs' age, gender, and educational backgrounds while the second one asked them to explain their criteria for the selection and presentation of material during lesson preparation, as well as the promotion of student interaction in class. The second questionnaire also consisted of two sections. The first one repeated the question on the selection of material and the promotion of student interaction included in the first questionnaire, while the second one asked PLACERs to reflect on their perceived strengths and weaknesses, as shown on their respective videotapes, as well as on the possible modifications they would introduce in their lesson were they to implement it in the future. Finally, the third instrument consisted of a protocol asking PLACERs to define self-reflection and explain its role and the impact of the videotape on their subsequent practices. Given some PLACERs' manifest intent to continue in the profession upon the expiration of their initial 2-year commitment to teaching, ad-hoc probing questions were formulated on the impact of self-reflection on this decision, as well as on their perceptions of teaching and learning. Their responses were subsequently added to the analysis.

Data Collection

Data was gathered at three different points in time during PLACERs' two-year tenure in PLACE. They were asked to complete the initial questionnaire during the first Methods course meeting of their second academic semester at LMU, and they did so in approximately 20 minutes. They turned in their responses to the second instrument during the course of their respective 60-minute individual conferences, scheduled at the end of the aforementioned semester. Finally, a focus group session held a year later provided PLACERs the opportunity to respond to questions from a protocol. The session was tape-recorded and its content later transcribed by the author's research assistant.

Data Analysis

One of the essential features of interpretive qualitative research is the continuous cycle of data collection and analysis (Glaser, 1998). Hence, constant comparisons (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) were used to compare the information gathered and to code and analyze the following data sets: PLACERs' responses to the first and second questionnaires, the instructor's field notes during each individual meeting, and

the transcript of the focus group session. The data was analyzed as was collected and the different sets were compared with one another in order to find similarities and differences among them. As the research progressed, categories were identified and new ones were added to the already existing ones or refined when necessary. This process was repeated until reaching saturation, the point at which no additional categories were found (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This ascertained the necessary reliability and ensured that the following categories remained constant: PLACERs' modifications in lesson preparation and delivery procedures; increased implementation of cooperative groups; provision of detailed directions and modeling prior to explanations and assignments; and impact of self-reflection on PLACERs' perceptions of teaching and commitment to their jobs. While the initial intent of the project only intended to investigate the impact of self-reflection on PLACERs' views of teaching and learning and on their classroom practices, the latter category, commitment to their jobs, was added to the analysis given PLACERs' responses in this regard during the focus group session.

RESULTS

Modifications in Lesson Preparation and Delivery Procedures

During their individual meetings, PLACERs concurred that they had drastically changed their lesson preparation and delivery procedures through the semester, shifting from an initial reliance on state-approved content area standards and teachers' guides to a constant incorporation of students' backgrounds and personal interests into their lessons. Thus, while their responses to the question on criteria for selection of material in the initial questionnaire contained such generalities as "I research topics online," or references to teacher guides, i.e., "I lesson plan by looking at the standards and topics in my manuals," or textbooks, as in "I follow Houghton Mifflin for Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies, and the Saxon Math program," their answers to the identical question in the second questionnaire revolved around students as the focal point of their routines. They acknowledged that their reflections throughout the semester had helped them understand that their most successful lessons had been those incorporating students' backgrounds and interests. As one PLACER explained during the focus group session, "What I have learned [in the methods course] is you have to prepare lessons to cater to individual students." Incorporating students' background knowledge into lessons and explanations had an extraordinary impact on students because it added relevance to the content learned in class. PLACERs' newly developed attitude toward lesson

planning and delivery was evident in the following comment, voiced during the focus group session: “Before, I was not that concerned whether I got through to the kids. Now, after thinking about it, whenever I think of activities, I always think first of them”.

The videotape assignment was an important contributor to these modified routines in that it provided PLACers with an extraordinary opportunity to contemplate their performances from a very different point of view. A comment during one of the individual meetings was reflective of this eye-opening experience: “Direct lessons are not beneficial for students. At the beginning I was more focused on being a teacher. After watching the videotape I realized the need to prepare lessons catering to individual students.”

An additional consequence of their concerted focus on students’ needs was PLACers’ development of a genuine interest in the lives of their pupils. Interestingly, this effort exposed some previously unnoticed factors negatively affecting students’ progress, as revealed during the focus group session:

“Last year I would say, “That kid is driving me crazy, and I don’t know why he’s acting that way.” And now I’m trying to find out why he is that way and not making judgments... So, if a student’s parent is divorced, I know and understand now, and try to work with the parent to find ways that we can best cater to the student’s emotional needs”.

Notwithstanding this paradigm shift, PLACers did not deviate from their ultimate goal of helping students master required grade-level standards. Yet, during the individual conferences, it was evident that neither standards nor textbooks continued to receive the preferential treatment of before: “Hearing others [PLACers] in class talk about it really helped... I still use the manuals, but have attempted to cater the lessons to [students’] needs and interests. For example, I do more visual activities and modeling.”

Overall, PLACers confirmed the lasting effects of their new teaching approach during the focus group session. Two sets of comments emerged in this regard. The first one openly criticized teachers’ manuals and state-approved standards as examples of a one-size-fits-all model utterly ignoring students’ needs. As one PLACer explained, “It’s easy for me to go up there and do standards by the book but [I think about it] and,... are they [students] really involved? And, are they really understanding?” The second set revolved around the necessary adjustments in PLACers’ routines to meet students’ learning styles and academic and linguistic proficiency levels. As one PLACer noted, the video assignment was instrumental

in that it forced her to reflect on the need to slow her pacing to adapt it to their students' rhythms. This constituted a complete turnaround from her initial attempt to achieve predetermined objectives by preset deadlines:

“What I noticed was that my entire lesson was very on schedule, but didn't really accommodate the learners that need a little bit more time or the language... I just stood in the middle and spoke to them directly...since I was trying to keep a schedule. That's one thing that... reflecting on it now... I am more flexible in timing my lessons”.

Increased Implementation of Cooperative Groups in Class

PLACERs' classroom implementation of the activities learned in the methods course, as well as their ensuing reflections on their performance, resulted in new perspectives on teaching and learning. Among them, that lectures were not as effective for learning as student-centered approaches revolving around cooperative groups. Interestingly, during the focus group session, PLACERs explained that their initial reticence to the implementation of this strategy was largely due to their fear of losing control of the classroom. As one of them noted:

“As a new teacher you want to be up there the entire time in control of your class, to the extreme of making sure they don't have any opportunity to go crazy. But they end up going crazy because they're so bored. So [after talking to other PLACERs] I learned to keep them engaged through certain activities or getting them to move around in a responsible, controlled way”.

A related concern in this regard was PLACERs' initial apprehension that the noise levels derived from students' participation in cooperative groups might interfere with, and even break, their classroom rules. For instance, one PLACER explained that, “One of the few things that did not go so well in the lesson was that students were not following the rules. They were very excited and it was difficult to maintain order during the activity.” Alarmed at this apparent loss of control, her immediate reaction was to stop the activity and review the rules with the different groups. Yet, upon eavesdropping on the still occurring interactions, she was pleasantly surprised by their productive, task-oriented nature: “The goal of the activity was to recall and review the story we had read. Since students were actually doing that by verbally helping each other in addition to the writing, I felt it was ok.” Along these lines, a second PLACER reflected on her placement of students in groups during

Math time by stating that, “Even though the students might seem out of control, they are really actually learning, and it’s okay for them to be out that way. As long as they’re learning and into the lesson, that’s fine.” In other words, PLACERs learned to accept that increasing movement and higher noise levels were necessary evils intimately connected to students’ active participation in class.

A third conflicting issue for two PLACERs during their individual meetings was the possible negative impact of cooperative groups on some students, especially those more introverted or possessing limited academic or linguistic skills. Yet, their concerns dissipated once they realized that students could flourish in these smaller, more controlled, environments:

“The activity was good for the students, since they were all able to actively participate in their groups. However, as they worked together in a group, they were still allowed to think independently”.

*Provision of Detailed Directions and Modeling Prior
to Explanations and Assignments*

During the focus group session, PLACERs explained that they had learned to organize their lessons and explanations around the “what-why-how” sequence learned in the methods course. As a result, their students seemed to achieve a better grasp of both content and tasks:

“I think that something that I do a lot more now when I’m preparing for my lessons is make sure to not take things for granted, or not assume that they know something. And make sure that I take the time to explain things in the best way... as far as vocabulary, language,... or as far as where each kid might be in the classroom”.

This approach contrasted with PLACERs’ initial tendency to assume students’ comprehension of their explanations. Interestingly, one of them pointed to his prior oversight of this strategy as the cause of what he once considered students’ subpar achievement. Thus, he explained that, “This made me think of all the other activities I have been doing throughout the year... I think about whether or not I spent that much time giving directions and whether or not they [directions] were clear enough.” Having witnessed the positive impact of the strategy on students’ outcomes, PLACERs continued to implement it consistently across content areas and grades. As one of them explained during the focus group session:

“Even though [this year] I just switched grades, it’s a lot better for me to understand where they’re [students] coming from... I taught 2nd and it’s 5th now, but I still do the same preliminary explanations because I’m finding all of the same things”.

Impact of Self-reflection on Perceptions of Teaching and Commitment to Jobs

During the focus group session PLACERs described self-reflection as “thinking about what one is doing” or “a personal meditation on one’s day,” thereby emphasizing the analytical nature of the process. When probed for more elaborate definitions, they seemed to concur that self-reflection was a critical contributor to teachers’ identification of “what needs to be the same and what needs to be different,” and necessary when trying to “figure out what needs to be changed to better your actions for the future.” The videotape assignment was important in this regard because, as one PLACER noted, the visual record of his performance allowed him to pinpoint “many areas that I could improve upon, as well as some of my strengths as a teacher and ways that I could think of changing this activity to make it more effective.”

Additionally, during the focus group session, PLACERs agreed that their gained ability to reflect on their practices had played an instrumental role on their manifest intention to remain in teaching at the end of their PLACE tenure, as well as on their *bona fide* eagerness to improve their professional preparation. A wider repertoire of strategies, their growing perceptions of efficacy, and encouragement from mentors and more experienced colleagues helped them contemplate the profession from a more optimistic standpoint:

“A lot of the teachers that have experience... say it’s just going to get better and, like for me,... it is. And I know that... I’m going to have all these years to reflect on these new ideas... so, this gives me the confidence that... it’s going to be easier for me”.

Having learned to consider past failures as steps toward success was also crucial in PLACERs’ shifting perceptions about teaching. Their weekly reflections on their performance contributed to give them the necessary poise to analyze their practices critically, examine the reasons for their failures, and introduce the necessary modifications in their practices to increase their effectiveness. Moreover, they gradually realized that becoming an effective teacher was an ongoing endeavor, with peaks and valleys, challenges and rewards. As one PLACER explained during the focus group session, this realization rendered a more positive outlook toward the job:

“After, like, two months, that’s when I was like, “Gosh! I don’t even know how to help these kids”... and that was so frustrating. But [I have thought about it] and this year I have some knowledge, and I’ve taken courses, and have skills and strategies for helping struggling learners”.

Furthermore, PLACers’ gained trust on their teaching abilities generated in them the confidence they needed to reach all students, not just those they were personally attached to:

“Overall, I have realized that I want my commitment to be to teaching... and not so much to this like “mother-like” commitment I have to this small group I had in my class last year that I feel so close to. I want my commitment to be more about my profession, and about me being able to be a better teacher so I can reach all kids from different angles”.

It maybe necessary to note at this point that PLACers’ exhibited candidness in the previous statements might inadvertently conceal their tortuous path to self-improvement. Overburdened with responsibilities both inside and outside the classroom and struggling to perform according to expectations, PLACers soon caved in to an overwhelming sense of frustration negatively impacting their personal and professional lives. Yet, the activities learned in the methods course and the subsequent reflection processes, coupled with their accumulated experience in the classroom, provided the buffering allowing them to evaluate past practices critically, examine strengths and flaws, and regain the drive to make up for past mistakes. A comment during the focus group session was revealing of a new attitude towards teaching and students in general:

“This year, when I am reflecting and some things go wrong, I find myself realizing that I know exactly why. I know that it’s because, okay, I know I didn’t take the time to plan this out or, you know, it’s because it’s right after lunch. I can figure out why, so that’s kind of nice too, realizing that I do understand—even if it does go wrong, it’s not my fault or I can pinpoint the reasons, so I feel more in control still even if it does go wrong”.

In sum, PLACers’ new attitude toward the profession was aptly summarized during the focus group session as: “[Last year] it was the first year and I was just flying by the seat of my pants; and once it was over, ‘Thank God it’s over!’ and on to the next thing. But I don’t have to worry about that anymore”.

DISCUSSION

One of the main challenges in educational research is the identification of those individual factors causing the resulting outcomes, due to the possible entanglement of intertwining effects. In the present project, for example, it could be argued that changes in PLACERs' practices and perceptions of teaching might be the result of their additional months in the classroom rather than their engagement in self-reflection. If so, this might be considered the main limitation of the study. Yet, it may also be contended that, while PLACERs' extended stay in the classroom might have undoubtedly help refine their routines and improve their classroom management skills, the bulk of their modifications would not have been possible without the reflection processes they were forced to engage on a weekly basis during a complete academic semester. Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that PLACERs' broadened repertoire of techniques and strategies, increased use of student-centered activities, and gained sense of efficacy was a direct consequence of their introspections.

By and large, PLACERs acknowledged the powerful impact of self-reflection on their betterment as teachers and their gained commitment to the profession. Having learned to embrace self-reflection as an integral component of their routines (Leather and Popovic, 2008) they felt reassured in the consistency of their instructional programs. Their statements in this regard revealed the pervasive impact of self-reflection on their lesson preparation and instruction delivery procedures, the provision of more detailed guidelines and modeling in class, the implementation of more participative classroom structures, and a more positive view of the profession. Moreover, PLACERs' genuine interest in the well-being of their students resulted in their questioning the adequacy of textbooks and official standards ignoring the needs of those whose lives they touched on a daily basis. In so doing, they appeared to mirror Nieto's findings when enquiring on teachers' reasons to remain in the profession (Nieto, 2003).

Having realized the dissociation between the content of textbooks and their students' backgrounds, PLACERs attempted a more effective incorporation of students' personal experiences into their practices. Concurrent with Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2010), numerous comments in this regard agreed that efforts at teaching pre-approved standards included in teachers' manuals and textbooks could not compare, in terms of students' engagement, to participatory approaches transforming students into the main protagonists of their own learning.

PLACERs' increased reliance on the use of cooperative groups was in direct relation to their realization that there were two types of noise: noise *per se* and the "high, sometimes even noisy, level of communication emphasizing student collab-

oration on small group projects organized around learning centers” (Garcia, 1991, p. 3). This realization equipped them with the logic to assert their decision to use this technique when questioned by doubtful administrators.

Self-reflection was also instrumental in PLACers’ decision to remain in education upon the completion of their two-year tenure. Teacher retention has been a concerning issue for teaching preparation programs due to the large attrition rate especially affecting novice professionals as a result of the challenges of the job (Stoeber and Rennert, 2008), namely excessive workload, classroom disruptions and low status (Cockburn and Haydn, 2004). These were also the main concerns of participants in Heafford and Jennison’s study on teachers’ reasons to remain or leave the profession (1998). The PLACers in the present study appeared to follow a similar pattern, being initially overwhelmed by the job, yet later gaining some balance as a result of their increasing classroom management skills, support from colleagues, and growing trust in their preparation. Kyriacou and Kunc (2007) point to these factors as crucial in teacher retention. In this regard, PLACers’ decision to remain in the profession in order to be able to continue to improve their practices and help their students exemplified a caring vision of teaching (Oliver and Poindexter, 2007) permeating many of their comments about reaching all students instead of only those with whom they had achieved rapport.

By and large, the findings of this project appeared reflective of Carter’s (2008) description of the changes taking place in teacher-learners espousing a reflective approach to teaching. For Carter, novice teachers’ “initial conviction that they know their destination and already possess a map,” generally end up revealing “a slightly less detailed map than the one they will have at the end of the course” (Carter, 2008, p. 43). For the PLACers participating in this project, their initial map was excessively dependent on content standards, teachers’ manuals and lectures. Yet, it ultimately yielded to a more interactive design incorporating students’ backgrounds and interests as a more cogent way of strengthening the teaching-learning bond.

Finally, in instilling in PLACers the need to reflect in their practices, the methods course intended to foster these novice teachers’ “attitude of inquiry” (Larsen-Freeman as quoted in Carter, 2008) toward their students and to lay the foundation of their teaching on the what, why, and how of their practices. PLACers’ concurrent teacher-learner status was enviable in this regard because it offered them the opportunity to develop their pedagogies while gaining the necessary knowledge in their teacher education coursework. As practicing teachers, self-reflection enabled them to evaluate their practices on an ongoing basis. As learners, it helped them analyze the effectiveness of the theory learned in their courses. This combination gave them the opportunity to witness the positive outcomes of the integration of theory and

practice in their teaching and to adopt more critical stances on their thought processes and practical routines.

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the present project highlight the impact of self-reflection on first-year Catholic school teachers with no previous experience in education. The PLACERs participating in the study, novice teachers with limited pedagogical preparation, introduced substantial modifications in their routines as a result of their engagement in self-reflection; among them, constant consideration for students' interests, a significant increase in the use of cooperative groups, and a greater emphasis on the provision of detailed guidelines and modeling prior to lesson delivery. The positive impact of these changes on their students and on themselves boosted PLACERs' perceptions of success and generated a desire to continue in the profession upon the completion of their 2-year commitment.

The findings of this study will be of interest for current as well as future instructors of PLACERs in that they show the power of self-reflection on novice teachers' practices. Likewise, they may also be of interest for instructors in the teacher education program at LMU. The incorporation of self-reflection into the content of their respective courses will help equip LMU teacher education graduates with an enhanced capacity to reflect on their performance from more analytical standpoints. This, in turn, will benefit their own students, who will be exposed to content and material more adequately adapted to their individual needs. The results of the project may also be of interest for other instructors at LMU, as well as at other colleges and universities in that they reveal the impact of self-reflection on individuals' behaviors and practices. Instructors may consider the relevance of the implementation of a student-centered curriculum, deeply committed to the development of critical thinking, on the generation of a critical conscience toward education-related issues among both teachers and students.

Examining the long-term effects of self-reflection on the PLACERs participating in this project escapes its scope, yet is an area that merits further investigation. Will PLACERs continue to engage in self-reflection in the future? Will the process continue to impact their practices as a result? Finding responses to these and other, related, questions will help expand the body of research in this area while contributing to teachers' implementation of more effective practices for their students, the ultimate beneficiaries of their expertise.

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