"Did anyone think the trees were students?" Using poetry as a tool for critical reflection.

Abstract

The practice of reflection in teacher education is a contentious area. Debates have focused on the nature of reflection and how to evidence that it is taking place. Students training to be teachers in the UK are expected to be taught about reflection and incorporate it into their practice. This qualitative study took place in response to difficulties trainee teachers had in grasping abstract concepts. The study explores the use of reading poetry as a tool for facilitating reflection. Data were gathered by observing groups at work with the poems and by interviewing the participants. The findings were that poetry particularly encourages students to venture to areas that they may not address unprompted. It also encouraged a particular form of reflection, to do with the nature of teacher identity and the value of teaching. We suggest that further studies with larger sample groups could be carried out to test these findings.

Keywords: reflection; teacher education; poetry reading.

Introduction

The impetus for this practice based research came from problems encountered whilst teaching on a pre-service professional teaching programme at a university in the south east of England. In order to complete a piece of coursework it was necessary for students on the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education course (PGCE) to grasp the concept of curriculum ideologies but they found this difficult: what does it mean to describe a curriculum as utilitarian/progressive/classical and how do these abstractions relate to the

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daily experiences of teaching and learning? To convey the importance of conceptualising ideologies the tutor turned to fictional texts, thinking that perhaps where dry description failed to engage, Mr Gradgrind of *Hard Times* or Plato's *The Myth of Metals* might succeed. One of the texts used was the poem *Learning the Trees* by Howard Nemerov, and this in particular stimulated keen and tangled discussions among small groups of students. How does knowledge transform teacher and students? Why might knowledge be 'funny'? Voices were raised, students became noticeably more animated than in previous sessions and at the end one remarked 'This was really good, really made me think about things in a different way.'

The tutor came away with the impression that something unexpected had happened in the class and wondered if this was related to the use of poetry and the quality of shared reflection it had prompted.

Many reservations have been expressed about the practice of reflection in teacher training. Some are discussed below but it is worth noting that key concerns have been around the difficulties of evidencing good reflection i.e. that which promotes questioning and critical thinking (West, 2010). Atherton in a lecture delivered in 2012 argued that in place of individualistic accounts teachers should promote more 'collective' and 'oblique' approaches to reflection. Examples of alternative reflective techniques used in this respect include the use of blogs, other social media, and focus groups. To explore whether and how poetry reading might support reflection a small poetry reading group of seven volunteers was convened three times in the summer at the end of the PGCE year to discuss a selection of poems. Group sessions were audio-recorded and the participants interviewed. This paper outlines the findings of our study. Firstly, we discuss how we have conceptualised reflective practice for the present study. This is followed by a discussion of how poetry has been employed in various fields. We then outline our methodology before moving on to our findings and points for discussion arising from this work.

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Reflection in the lifelong learning sector

Reflection has long been a requirement for trainee teachers. Within the British Lifelong Learning or adult education sector Atherton (2012) notes a 'stratospheric' rise in literature pertaining to reflection since the 1990s. He argues this is a complementary process to the growth in a continuous professional development culture within Further Education colleges and Sixth Form Colleges. In 2007 the organisation Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) devised professional standards governing the training of Lifelong Learning teachers, and, whilst these are at the time of writing being revised they still constitute the 'learning domains' within which training programmes are developed. Reflection is a thread running through these professional standards in the requirement that trainees reflect critically on a range of professional issues and practices. (LLUK 2007).

At the university where this study took place trainees are assessed on their ability to reflect on teaching and learning and critically analyse reflective practice theories. However, despite the prevalence of reflective practice in PGCEs, there is widespread doubt about both conceptualisation and operationalisation of the term 'reflection.' It is not in the remit of this literature review to arbitrate these debates but it seems useful at the outset to briefly review these broad issues in order to define the grounds on which the present research took place.

Conceptualising reflection in our research

. Reflection is a broad term and may be described as a low consensus concept. There are practical problems in adopting a reflective approach to learning and this relates differences in both definition and operationalization of the term. Early theorists such as John Dewey drew a distinction between 'routine action' and 'reflective action'. The latter, he argued, was characterised by the disposition or attitude of being 'open minded' of having

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> ...the desire to listen to more sides than one, to give heed to facts from whatever source they come...to recognise the possibility of error even in the beliefs which are dearest to us. (Pollard, 2008, p.19)

In this definition reflection may be characterised as essentially a habit of "active enquiry and careful deliberation"

(Dewey,1910, p 68). There is no proscription on the timing of such reflection. Moon (2000) points out that writers such as Van Manen have applied the term to thinking about events in the future- in effect to anticipation and planning. Schon, (1983) developed the notion that reflection may be usefully thought of as either *in* or *on* action. Reflection *in action* means reflecting about what one is doing as one does it (and therefore in a site specific place), reflection *on action* refers to thinking 'after the event or an encounter with others...(and, perhaps confusingly)...can also mean focusing on something significant' (Ghaye, 2011, p.7). A further useful distinction for the present research is that made by Hillier between contextual, experiential and dispositional reflection (2005, p.9). The latter is a type of reflection which identifies the predispositions, emotions and values of teachers and brings these to consciously bear on actions in the classroom. Poetry used as a tool may be said to advance this kind of open ended and fluid reflection.

Some other constructions of reflection, for example those espoused by Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988) situate reflection within systems of staged thought. Various models may be found in the literature, shared features seem to be that these models are virtuously cyclical, having as an underlying philosophy that the purpose of reflection is to review classroom practice in order to improve teaching and learning. Such models assume reflection is a systematic process of rational thought. The role of emotion in such models therefore seems to be relegated to the role of being a spur to action rather than as a legitimate part of reflection in itself. One consequence of this is that what Rosenblatt (2005) refers to as efferent

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meanings, are privileged over the aesthetic. Efferent meaning refers to making meaning around the axis of factual and logical material (how to sequence a scheme of work for example). The construction of aesthetic meanings includes attention to emotive, sensuous and qualitative experiences, it is 'concerned with... (the fusion of) cognitive and affective elements – sensations, images and ideas into a personally lived (experience)' (Rosenblatt 2005, p.98).

When readers engage in aesthetic meaning they evoke private as well as public aspects of experience and this matches well with the needs of teacher trainees as they reflect on the many dilemmas of a busy classroom (Pollard 2008). The work of Mezirow is significant in this respect. He argues that learning itself 'may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation on the meaning of an experience' (cited in Moon, 2000, p.109) . Seen this way the concept of reflection becomes inextricably linked to the processes of learning and this again is an indication of the sheer breadth and variety of ways in which reflection has been conceptualised. Atherton (2012) argues

that reflection is a concept made to bear a great deal of weight within teacher training and that attempts to contain the concept of reflection in an 'ideal type' model can falter to become instrumentalist practices lacking awareness and radical questioning of trainees work (West, 2010, p.66).

Two major questions seem to arise from the discussion above: does reflection have any worth as a concept? If it does what reflective activities might be considered meaningful and useful for trainee teachers? How might we avoid the pitfall Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) identify whereby the invitation to engagement which reflection seems to offer deteriorates into rule following behaviour.

To consider whether reflection has any worth as a concept it might be helpful to imagine what a *non-reflective* evaluation of teaching experience might look like. Lacking

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curiosity, imagination, the ability to reframe experiences from another's perspective, an account written with these features would almost certainly fail to be an evaluation.

It follows then that reflection may be described as part of the process of evaluation. The quality and demands of such a process are not straightforward. Berlak and Berlak (1981) point out that teachers are constantly called upon in the course of their work to deal with decisions that rest primarily on value judgements eg: about balancing individual and group needs/ the use of praise and punishments. In common with similar practice based professionals such as nurses, teachers rely on tacit knowledge to guide decisions. A challenge for trainers 'involves thinking about how best to support and guide students through everyday complex…situations… characterised with emotions and moods that are not fully understood…but significantly influence the educator's perception of what is going on' (Ree cited in Paton, 2005, p53) A possible role for poetry in promoting multiple perspectives and exploring dilemmas is explored in a later section of this article, The many uses of poetry.

Drawing on a range of research into reflection on U.S and Australian teaching programmes Hatton and Smith (1995) offer a synthesised framework for discriminating thinking skills associated with teacher reflection. It is this model that has been used to guide the present research. Hatton and Smith describe a hierarchy of reflective types of thinking. At the lower end of the hierarchy reflection is a fault fixing technical exercise. At this stage reflections on teaching experience may rely on descriptive accounts of events and specific problem solving. Further up the scale reflection develops into considerations of what constitutes best practice; at a later stage reflection becomes dialogic-capable of weighing viewpoints. At the top of the hierarchy reflection becomes critical and contextualised. Characteristics of such accounts are that they question 'according to ethical criteria, the goals and practices of one's profession' (1995, p.45).

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Reflective teachers are able to think about the effects of their actions on others, share thoughts and explore alternative scenarios with others taking into account political and cultural forces. It is a *means* as well as *ends* exercise. At heart reflection may be defined as

'persistent and careful consideration of practice in the light of knowledge and beliefs, showing attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and whole heartedness' (Noffke and Brennnan cited in Hatton and Smith, 1995, p.34)

Akin to Friere's concept of 'consciencisation' reflection is an attempt to understand and change ones actions through radical questioning of self and social reality. Seen in this way reflection is revealed as an emotional experience which engages the feelings as well as the thoughts of teachers. If this is the case reflection deserves innovative methods of elucidation which can support teachers in the art of taking risks.

Incorporating reflection into teacher training

How might teacher trainers support reflection as critical thought? For those designing courses issues around timing and task are problematic. Furlong and Maynard (1995) have characterised the early stages of teaching practice for the trainee teacher as a survival stage and argued that the stressful early weeks of training are not fertile times for constructive reflection. Accordingly, only when trainee teachers have achieved a modest management of practical skills and, crucially, have begun to assert an identity as a teacher apart from other personal identities can the business of reflection begin. In a crowded and evidence based curriculum reflection can become just another competency to tick and trainees may be tempted to write to fit the expectations of their teachers. Evidence for this concern is supported by the work of Petty and Hogben (1980) whose synthesis of studies into the process of teacher socialisation suggested that 'impression management' is key to pre-service

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trainees' experiences and that the teaching practices of trainees '...tend to remain personal syntheses of idiosyncratic experiences.'(1980, p.60)

Formally assessing trainees' thoughts about personal experiences is fraught with difficulty not least because the meaning of reflection is embedded within personal and political contexts. Boud et al (1985) have asked the question what do you have to do to fail an assessed reflective piece of work? In our experience written reflective accounts, contained as they are by word counts do not always develop beyond a technical and descriptive level, for example: 'The lesson went well because I was prepared and taught well and the students were in the mood to learn.' Concerns have also been expressed by Dennison (2010) about the value of the medium. Written reflection has the advantage of externalising thoughts and encouraging clarity of internal dialogues but the act of producing a linear account can also prematurely order and limit the expression of ideas.

Alternatives to the formal assessment of individual accounts of reflection have been proposed. These include journal writing/ blogs; checklists and mentoring; rigorous introduction to literature on the nature of reflection; pair and group discussions of practice to engender communities of practice. Wenger (2006) suggested the use of visualisation and metaphor to support the development of teacher role identity, an idea which has resonance with the current research (see below). Fox and Lambirth (2012) explored how trainee teachers reflected on representations of teachers and teaching on film. More fundamentally Atherton (2012) has suggested that the practice of reflection might best be taught 'obliquely'. In his view the challenge for teacher trainers is not to travel the cul-de-sac of teaching reflection but to facilitate and encourage the capacity to wonder and talk about issues that arise in teaching and learning. Asking questions about incidents that perplex our trainees while resisting the urge to offer overt teaching points may be an important skill that teachers can offer. The poet John Keats termed this 'negative capability': the ability to bear

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'uncertainties and doubts without irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry and Osborne 1983, p.58), to build capacity on which to base later, tentative judgements about teaching and learning. The question arises: might reading and discussing poetry offer something special to reflection, something that other media for reflection are unable to offer?

The many uses of poetry

This section outlines the different uses to which poetry has been put. It is important to acknowledge at this point that the term 'poetry' is a contested term, there is no consensus on what constitutes a poem, or indeed poetry (Andrews 1991). The literature on this topic is too wide-ranging to include in this article, for our purposes, the poems that we used are all published and in the public domain, named by their authors as poems and widely accepted as such.

A search of the SwetsWise database of academic literature, using the search terms 'poetry' and 'reading', 'tool', and 'method' demonstrated that the reading and the writing of poetry have been used in varied ways in diverse contexts, ranging from accounting education to qualitative research. As Threlfall (2013) points out, there are several examples of studies combining the use of poetry with education. The use of poetry as a tool in psychotherapy has been growing over recent decades, to the extent that poetry therapy is now a recognised field, with its own professional association and journal (Collins, Furman & Langer 2006).

Asking respondents to write autobiographical poems is a recognised method of gathering qualitative research (see for example Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo & Kulkarni, 2007). In a literature review of the various ways in which poetry is used in qualitative research, Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, Richard, & Schendel (2010) divided these into six main groups as follows:

1) Participants' own poetry treated as data;

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2) Studies from an anthropological perspective on how cultures employ poetry;

3) Ethnographic or anthropological field notes written in the form of poetry;

4) Autoethnographic poetry, that is, poetry used by the researcher themselves to explore their own experience;

5) Data poems, where researchers use quotations from the participants to produce poems;

6) Qualitative researchers may employ poetic allusion, linking their work to published poetry, much as a writer might reference other literary genres and texts.

The use of autoethnographic poetry could be seen as reflective, allowing the researcher to situate themselves in relation to the data or context they are exploring. However, references to the use of poetry most often refer to poetry *written* by research participants rather than read by them, as was the case in our study (see for exampleKrom and Williams 2011; Threlfall 2013). Furman, Coyne & Negi (2008) had some success using the writing of students' own poetry with social work students to promote self-reflection.

Raingruber (2009) resonates most closely with our work. This study, situated within the field of nursing studies, used poetry reading as a tool to help students understand the process of analysing qualitative data. Poetry's use of symbolic language and the multiple readings available to readers of poems was considered to be a way in to understanding the variety of interpretations that may be drawn from qualitative data. The students involved in the study worked in small groups to collaboratively explore and analyse the poems. The exercise proved to be successful, and particularly relevant to our study, the author claimed that the use of poetry 'cultivates a reflective mindset' (2009, p.1753)

Across the literature on incorporating the use of poetry, common reasons for doing so were:

- Poetry offers depictions of different lives and perspectives.

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- Poetry requires slow and careful reading, necessitating stepping aside from the fast pace of everyday life.

- Poetry allows exploration of the human condition.

- Poetry's use of symbolic language enables understanding of the layers of meaning that may be involved in texts. In poetry 'thinking and feeling remain unified, avoiding the educational apartheid of mind' (Benton 1985, p23) which may persist in formal education.

Arguably, the belief that poetry depicts different lives is somewhat problematic. It is underpinned by the assumption that poetry is a straightforward representation of a life or lives, which ignores the fact that poems are crafted pieces of art, there is the hand of the writer at work in shaping the text. However, certainly in our experience with the participants in our research, readers can and do read poems as if they are direct representations, identifying the 'I' or voice of the poem as synonymous with that of the author. In the work we were undertaking this had interesting consequences for the discussions students had, as we outline later.

Methodology

As already mentioned, a group of seven students training to teach in the FE sector were convened to discuss poetry, they all took part in at least two out of three group session (one student was absent for the final session). The group were self-selecting; all students on the full time programme were offered the opportunity to participate in the research. The students were training to teach a variety of subjects, three of them being specifically trained as Literacy/English teachers. Collectively they were not typical of the whole PGCE cohort. Only one of the group members was male and the majority were described by one member as

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'white women of a certain age'-most were over 35 years old and only one was from an ethnic minority. In the quotations from participants, pseudonyms are used.

Not all of the participants had a pre-existing positive relationship with poetry: 'No experience of reading poetry since O level and school. I didn't like it. I didn't understand it.' Sandra

Motivations for choosing to participate in the research included having an interest in reflection, and thinking it might be an interesting experience.

The first of the three sessions was used to define and discuss how the group would work. Key points were: there was no obligation to join in discussion of any of the poems and no obligation to write poetry. (It is noteworthy that two or three members of the group who enthusiastically gave up their time to read poems told the researchers they would not have taken part if they had been expected to write poems). Participants were also reassured that the experience would not be about an exam style close reading of the poems and no knowledge of jargon was necessary. To illustrate and explore this point the group read and commented on the Billy Collins poem *Introduction to Poetry* which critiques the practice of analysing poetry, and compares it to torturing the poem to obtain its meaning.

Six poems were selected for discussion in the subsequent meetings. Poems were drawn from 20th century British and American writers and chosen for the possible themes they might evoke. Three different poems were discussed in each group session: *Mrs Krikorian* by Sharon Olds was the first poem to be discussed and was chosen for its depiction of the teacher as a life changing figure which itself is a potent cultural convention. *Learning the Trees* by Howard Nemerov and *The Choosing* by Liz Lochead were also explored in the first session. The latter was chosen for its themes around class and patriarchy.

In Mrs Tilcher's Class by Carol Ann Duffy started the last session and was chosen to facilitate the formation of connections between personal memories of schooling and the role

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of the teacher. *Afternoon in School The Last Lesson* by D. H. Lawrence and U.A. Fanthorpe's poem about retiring from teaching, *Hereby* were also discussed in the last session.

The following questions were offered to the students to prompt their thinking and time was made for students to write notes about their responses if they wished.

1) Do pictures come into your head?

2) Do you hear or smell anything?

3) Do words or phrases leap out for you?

4) What feelings are evoked (if any)?

5) Do you have moments of confusion? Where?

6) Do you want to ask questions about the content or the form?

7) Do you like the poem, dislike it, feel indifferent?

8) Does the poem say anything to you?

9) Does the poem evoke any thoughts about your experiences as a teacher?

One of the researchers, the group's usual tutor, delivered the sessions whilst the other observed and took notes. Both sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The participants were also individually interviewed after the group sessions had taken place and one student offered a section of her personal diary as further source material.

The first stage of data analysis was to develop themes. The themes were grounded in the data but had to relate to our research question, in order to enable us to solve our intellectual puzzle (Mason 1996). Both researchers read the transcripts separately and developed their themes individually, comparing them later to produce an agreed set of categories, as follows: affirmation and comfort; teacher identity; teacher responsibility; learning and knowledge; connections to personal life; connections to teaching; group experience; teaching methodology; poetry as a tool.

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Both researchers coded a tranche of interviews but regular comparison exercises were conducted to ensure consistency in coding. The same procedure was followed with the transcripts of the group sessions.

We then used the Framework method to manage the data and continue analysis. This method employs a matrix to organise the data, whereby the rows contain data from each case and the columns are the themes (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). When the group sessions were analysed, instead of the rows being individuals, the rows conformed to the different poems. Analysis proceeded in an iterative fashion, moving between the interview data and that from the group sessions, in order to compare what was said about reflection and poetry and then what happened in the group, and also moving between the data and theoretical perspectives. This iterative process facilitated the construction of a more explanatory account (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

Findings

We found a range of reflective activities occurring in both group discussion and one-to-one interviews and these reflections were mapped to the Hatton and Smith schema mentioned above.

The nature of group reading and discussion enabled participants to construct and deconstruct poems together: 'It's called *The Choosing* but for me it's about the effects of choosing more than *The Choosing'* (Martha)

'*Maybe Who Chooses* would be a better title?' (Louise)

Research participants found sources of affirmation in some of the poems. This was more likely to be discussed in the interviews, there are few examples of the affirmative value of different poems being discussed in the group sessions, possibly indicating that this is an aspect around which the participants may have desired some privacy.

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There were two main dimensions in which the poems were felt to be affirming: where the poems affirmed values and beliefs, and where they affirmed that teaching is a worthwhile activity.

The poems *Learning the Trees*, *In Mrs Tilcher's Class*, and *Mrs Krikorian* particularly encouraged comments about affirmation, as one student said about *Learning the Trees*: 'This poem makes me feel like learning is about everything, not learning in just one place. The poem is a confirmation of a belief I had.'

For Gulcan *In Mrs Tilchers Class* evoked both personal nostalgia and attested to her personal educational achievements 'Look at where I am now. I feel proud. It's such a long process and how fast it is – how fast my education's gone.'

One of the trainees raised the issue of affirmation by opposite. This was in connection with the D.H Lawrence poem which features a disillusioned teacher battling with an uninterested class that are compared to a 'pack of unruly hounds'. This poem gave the trainee an image of the kind of teacher they did not want to be. It also allowed them to reflect on the narrator's approach to teaching, in the light of what they had learned about teaching on their PGCE course: '...with the benefit of the training we've had it's very easy to see the things he's doing wrong.' (Bill)

For Bill the experience of poetry reading affirmed the process of self-questioning about the purpose and meaning of his work, a process for which he used the term 'higher reflection':

> The poems in general gave me ideas of higher reflection- sort of why I do it generalities.
> Am I really helping? Am I making a difference? I felt supported by the poems, -
> especially the DH Lawrence ….and that's important for me.(Excerpt from interview)

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Discussions about the meaning and value of teaching were threaded throughout the sessions, although Bill was the only participant to refer to this as 'higher reflection'. The U.A. Fanthorpe poem, *Hereby* in particular evoked comments of this nature, perhaps as it is about a life changing on retirement from teaching:

> this is a choice poem because you've got on this hand freedom from all this and on this hand this is what you're doing now and we're all making that choice aren't we and we're actively wanting to be motivated to take this path and I didn't see it as, I saw this happening not at the end of a career but during. (Sandra, excerpt from group discussion)

The group experience encouraged shared reflection and a weighing of views. The discussion sometimes took abrupt changes of direction. For example, the poem *Mrs Kirkorian* prompted extended thought about the responsibilities, role and influences of the teacher. Martha summarised themes that were important for her regarding teacher facilitation and the benefits for students of making mistakes. The discussion was then immediately taken in a new direction when Louise remarked 'I think it's a picture of an inspiring teacher but I didn't like the poem….'

Sometimes discussions were prompted directly by response to the poetic form 'I like it… the language is really round it's like a chocolate caramel melting on your tongue' (Sandra on *Learning the Trees*)

and sometimes by the themes, what Louise liked to call 'the lessons' or 'messages' of the poems.

Reflections in the group discussion cannot be easily categorised as belonging to different levels of the Hatton and Smith hierarchy. Descriptive, critical and contextualised comments were frequently blended together and personal identification with a poem sometimes led directly to ethical and professional considerations. The DH Lawrence poem for example caused eyebrow raising and laughter followed by a long musing from Louise

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about the 'struggle' she experienced teaching functional skills to a group of teenagers. Similarly *Mrs Krikorian* prompted Martha to talk about her personal identification with the role of teacher as saviour and the dubious ethical dilemmas this poses: 'I have had a student last week tell me I was an angel and they were glad I was sent to them, which was terrifying because I think I absolutely cannot let this person down now'.

Being part of the group also prompted direct comments about reflection, eg: after reading *Afternoon in SchoolThe Last Lesson l* Sandra talked about reflection directly and her self-development 'I actually started thinking about reflecting on what I could do obviously about me and my techniques as a teacher but also what kind of support would I be looking at and what could I learn....'

Concerns about the relationship of theory to practice were expressed several times in both discussion and one-to-one interviews, and this may reflect the fact that the group convened at the end of the course when students were focused on future employment prospects. This is illustrated by a comment from Bill when discussing *Learning the Trees*:

> you do a PGCE and you read about norms and to some extent stereotypes and you go into the classroom and I think I was saying in class earlier it doesn't quite marry to what people suggest it might

One aim of the research was to discover whether a poetry reading group would engage emotional responses, evoke what Rosenblatt would term an aesthetic response. 'Poetry affects me emotionally and opens me up to ideas. In a classroom my emotions shut down in some respects…. Poetry opens up a channel' (Martha)

This comment suggests that in a professional environment, opportunities to do what Schon (1983) refers to as 'in action' reflection can be very limited. Discussing poetry however, can provide 'on action' reflection, it opens a space to look at a whole experience.

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In the interviews all the participants reported enjoying the experience of reading and discussing poetry in a group. Sandra talked about the kinds of thoughts she had in the group and contrasted these with her more typical work related thoughts: ' I thought it was really useful. I was using my brain in a different way. This reflection was unsystematic and it was almost like time off. I had a different space in my brain from formal learning.'

In drawing a distinction between 'work' and 'non-work' thoughts and using the metaphor of space she seems to be describing an aesthetic experience.

The data suggest that external prompts can take us to places we might not find alone. As Kerry remarked in interview,

> I'm glad I did this. The poem The Choosing upset me ….It brought up stuff for me so I had to process it. Poetry seems bound with your own experience. I would not have accessed the emotions, the experiences without the poems. They poked a stick at things I thought were sorted.

At times the language of the poems, a specific metaphor or title, led people to reflect in ways that were not related to the themes of the poem but were nevertheless important to the person concerned. For example Gulcan took the concept of 'choosing' from *The Choosing* to express her concerns with teaching 'students that don't want to be there but they're there because they have to be'.

As mentioned above participants sometimes read poems as if they were direct representations of the poet's personal experiences and this had both positive and negative outcomes in terms of reflection. A positive effect was that this kind of reading led people to make immediate connections with their experiences, when discussing *Mrs Krikorian* they identified immediately with the teacher role and discussed their own similar experiences on that basis 'presumably it's autobiographical in some senses' (Bill) However at times reflection was confused and impeded by reading poems as if they are real life: 'poetry is so

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personal I think you can only take from it how you feel and not get behind how she feels … whether you think it's right or wrong' (Martha)

Students were not always conscious that reflection was taking place and this raises the question of how they conceptualise reflection and what counts as reflection for them. It was possible that they had a more instrumental approach to reflection as a result of it being an assessed aspect of their PGCE. Bill articulated this most clearly in his interview 'we didn't really discuss reflection… there were not that many observations on our own teaching practice or links to wider principles. But the group… was invigorating.'

Having highlighted key findings from the data, we will move on to draw some conclusions from this research and refer these back to the literature on reflection.

Conclusion

Given that this is a small-scale study with self-selecting

participants, it is not possible to generalise from the data to the general population of teacher trainees. Yet it offers some interesting possibilities.We argue that poetry reading may be a useful tool for reflection, particularly in encouraging reflection on ones motivation to teach, given the dominance of this area as a thread within discussions, what one of the participants in his interview called 'higher reflection': 'The poems in general gave me ideas of higher reflection- sort of why I do it generalities' (Bill).

Such thoughts about the purposes of teaching and what it means to act as a teacher maps directly to Hatton and Smith's description of critical reflection where teachers are concerned with 'the goals and practices of one's profession' (1995, p.45)

It is as if the poems act as an external voice, encouraging thought in areas the student may not venture to without prompting. Given that teaching is both an arduous and rewarding activity, which can be made demoralizing by events in the classroom and the demands of frequent policy changes, we suggest that it is important for students to have a secure grip on

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why they are teaching and why teaching is a valuable profession. Discussing various cultural representations of teachers, for example, teacher as saviour/drudge/mother, also allows students to work through their fears about the expectations their own students may have about them.

Reading and discussing poems in a group enabled a range of topics to be explored, including motivation for teaching, the nature of knowledge, unequal relationships between teachers and students, the effects of labelling children, and cultural stereotypes. This can be seen as an example of 'dialogic' reflection within which students discuss 'competing claims and viewpoints' (Hatton and Smith 1995, p.45)

There is evidence that participants were engaged emotionally as well as intellectually. Group discussions were often flowing and like the poetry that provoked them sometimes took imaginative leaps. An example of this would be the quote we have chosen as the title for this paper, a rather left field comment from one of the students, inspired by *Learning the Trees*. A strong component of reflection was the affirmation that poetry can offer and the word 'comfort' was attached to the experience of reading the poems several times by three of the participants.

The value attached to membership of the group can be surmised from the interviews. Comments included 'it was almost therapeutic...' and 'It was kind of relaxing, it doesn't tire you, it was a time out experience'. All of the members of the group had kept the poems and one had passed them on to friends and family to read.

Our experience of the use of poetry in this study has been a positive one and we would recommend it as a strategy for practitioners, particularly those who are struggling to step back sufficiently from their practice to be able to reflect on it critically. We would suggest that it does offer an 'oblique and collective' (Atherton 2012) alternative to solitary written accounts. Educational academics might consider investing time in small discussion

groups drawing on a variety of literary texts to support the development of critical and contextualised narrative reflection.

We also suggest that further research should be done in this area, with a larger sample of participants. It would also be useful to see if, once they are fully immersed in the waters of teaching as a career, with little time for reflection, teachers continue to find poetry reading an engaging and useful exercise.

"Did anyone think the trees were students?" Using poetry as a tool for critical reflection.

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