Facilitating Reflection with Supporting Groups: A Model of Collective Teaching Reflection

Xuesong Wang
Texas A & M International University

Abstract

This paper reports the findings of four-semester action research study, in which the investigator collaborated with a group of teachers and systematically explored and studied several methods of improving teaching reflection in a preschool. The study led to the development of a practical model of collective teaching reflection. The model consists of three interrelated methodological components: a dialogue reflection journal, a reflective seminar, and a reflection portfolio. With distinctive emphases and functions, the three methods complemented each other to facilitate a deeper level of reflection in participating teachers in the school where the researcher conducted the study. The common feature of the three methods is that they all involve intensive peer interactions and collaboration within supporting groups. The study brings new insights to school administrators on how to enhance teaching reflection in their organizations.

Keywords: teacher reflection; reflective practice; teacher professional development
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In the last two decades, reflection has been a key concept in the field of professional development (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). This concept has its historical origin in Dewey’s theory. Dewey (1933) believed that reflection is critical in the teaching process because it changes teachers’ habitual and routine actions to deliberate actions. Schön (1983; 1987) further developed the concept of reflection by categorizing it into three types: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action refers to ongoing monitoring of teaching activities during the teaching process. Reflection-on-action is post-active examinations of the teaching process. Reflection-for-action is a deliberate consideration of future teaching efforts. Zhu (2011) referred to the three types of reflection as interactive reflection, retroactive reflection, and prospective reflection. Although researchers still have issues regarding the definition and dimensions of reflection, they have reached a consensus on one aspect of the construct—that reflection can and should play a critical role in improving teaching practice and facilitating teachers’ professional development. Schön (1987) argued that reflection facilitates teachers’ professional growth in a continual and profound way. Heichel and Miller (1993) claimed that reflection helps teachers think critically about their teaching practice.

Although no one would doubt that reflection could play a critical role in improving teaching practice and facilitating teachers’ professional development as proposed by theorists and educators, a practical question remains. To what extent does reflection play these roles in actual practice? In the first interview I had with the principal of a preschool in Beijing, where I conducted this collaborative action research study, the principal expressed her frustration with the status of teachers’ reflection in the school. The principal said,

“To be honest with you, although our teachers have been writing teaching reflections for years, many of our teachers’ reflection journals are still mainly comprised of records of events occurring in classrooms or records of students’ struggle and success. We had tried to improve the quality of teachers’ reflection by giving a series of workshops. However, they did not help very much. But, I cannot really say that our teachers’ reflection is done in a very critical way so that it supports a continuous professional growth in teachers”.

When asked about the status of teaching reflection in their schools in a statewide conference held in Texas in 2012, a group of school principals and daycare center directors expressed the same concerns. The majority of the groups agreed that teachers’ reflection in their schools often lacks depth and substance, and it is very difficult to sustain quality reflection in reality.

Researchers conducting both empirical research and action research studies have identified several reasons for the lack of quality of reflection in practice. Moore (2004) pointed out a correlation between an external locus of control and reflection with no substance. According to Moore (2004), when written reflection becomes a requirement of a daily responsibility of the job, it may encourage shallow reflection as teachers attempt to meet the
intensive institutional demands for written reflection. Hourani (2013) proposed that lack of reflection skills and having emotional barriers of confronting one’s own “mistakes” are main reasons for the poor quality of teaching reflection. Rather than focusing on the possible reasons for poor reflection, another group of researchers conducted studies to explore specific methods or strategies that enhance the quality of teaching reflection. These researchers have reported that meaningful discussions among colleagues, both face-to-face and online, enhanced teachers’ reflection on their own practice (Campbell, Johnson, & Stylianidou, 2011; Manouchehri, 2002; Ruan & Griffith, 2011). Supported writing also improved reflection (Lee, 2010; Purcell, 2013). Danielowich (2012) demonstrated that peer collaboration in groups made a difference in teachers’ reflection and learning compared with those in non-peer contexts. A review of the literature in this line of research reveals that having teachers reflect on their own teaching practice in various social contexts was a common feature of these studies. The researchers in these studies had a different perspective on reflection than what Dewey originally proposed (1933). Rather than assuming reflection is a purely introspective and individual activity, these researchers believe that reflection is an interpersonal activity with a social dimension. As Convery (1998) commented, “Reflection must be recognized as an activity that can only be developed in conducive social and emotional circumstances” (p. 202). Another common feature of the studies is that they tend to examine the effectiveness of a single method on improving teaching reflection; and for understandable reasons, the majority of the studies were done in a relatively short time (e.g., a semester). The current paper presents a collective reflection model based on a four-semester action research study. Rather than focusing on a single method, the study explored how multiple methods can complement each other and collectively enhance teacher reflection in a school setting. The research questions that guided the study were: (1) What are the best methods to enhance teaching reflection in a school setting? (2) How can teachers use supporting groups to enhance reflection with the use of new methods? (3) How do different methods complement each other to facilitate and promote better teaching reflection?

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants of the study were eight teachers and one curriculum coordinator in a preschool in Beijing, China. The teachers voluntarily participated in the study. Below is a summary of the background information of the participants (Table 1). Participant identifiers are pseudonyms. All participants were female teachers with anywhere from three to 22 years of teaching experience.
Table 1.

Background Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Highest degree</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Years of work as a teacher</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher T. G.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Early childhood education (ECE)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Z. Z.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher K. Y.</td>
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<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher S. B.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>ECE</td>
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<td>Pre-K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Z. J.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>English Literature</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher W. X.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>English Literature</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kind*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher W. J.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Ch. S.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum Coordinator</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Kindergarten

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This was a collaborative action research study. In the study, a research team consisting of the researcher, eight teachers, and the curriculum coordinator of the preschool worked together towards the goal of improving teachers’ reflection practice in the preschool. The researcher’s role in this ten-person research team was to take a leadership role in analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the reflection methods teachers used; to propose new methods and strategies for improving teachers’ reflection practices; and to evaluate the effectiveness of the new methods and strategies for reflection.

To identify the weaknesses and strengths of reflection methods in use and to evaluate the effectiveness of new reflection methods, the researcher collected data from multiple sources, including reflection journal entries, written lesson plans, reflection portfolios, focus group interviews, and participants’ reflections of their own growth and experiences in this action research study. All data from the above sources was converged during data analysis to obtain a holistic understanding of the status of teachers’ reflection. For each participant, the researcher purposefully selected sixteen reflection journal entries, six written lesson plans and one reflection portfolio for analysis. In addition, the researcher included the transcripts of eight focus group interviews and the participants’ written reflections of their own growth and experiences in the study for analysis. During data collection, the researcher used several measures to verify the authenticity of data collected. First, the researcher and the principal of the preschool had an agreement that reflection journals teachers written during the study would not count against them in the evaluation of their job performance. The teachers were fully aware of this agreement at the beginning of the study. Second, the researcher excluded the administration of the preschool from all focus group interviews so that the teachers could share their true thoughts with the researcher without feeling threatened. Teachers’ comments in those interviews remained anonymous to the administration afterwards. Thirdly, all group interviews occurred in an open, trusting, and positive atmosphere; and teachers knew that they could always send confidential emails to the researcher through a common email account whenever they were uncomfortable about sharing thoughts and opinions in public. Lastly, the researcher asked the teachers to
review the transcripts of focus group interviews for accuracy immediately following the
interviews.

The researcher conducted content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to analyze
qualitative data acquired from the different sources. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996),
content analysis should follow certain steps to ensure the credibility of data. The analysis of data
occurred in the following steps: (1) the researcher conducted an initial analysis of teachers’
reflection journals, meeting minutes of reflective seminars, and/or reflection portfolios to
identify possible points of focus and potential coding categories; (2) next, the researcher
analyzed the reflections participants wrote to summarize their experiences and analyze their own
growth in the study to confirm identified points of focus and coding categories; (3) then, the
researcher developed coding categories and procedures based on what was found at the first two
steps; (4) finally, the researcher conducted focus group interviews to obtain additional
information about the identified points of focus, probing the participants with specific focused
questions regarding the content of their reflections. The researcher repeated the four-step
process several times to obtain an accurate understanding of the status of teachers’ reflections as
data analysis progressed.

Context of the Study

The researcher conducted this collaborative action research study in a preschool located
in the suburb of Beijing, China. The preschool serves 510 children age three to six. There are 72
teachers currently working in the preschool. Ninety percent of teachers have a bachelor’s degree
in early childhood education or elementary education. Five percent of teachers have a bachelor
degree in some other major such as English literature. Five percent of teachers have an associate
degree in early childhood education.

The administration of the preschool values the role of reflection for teacher professional
development and required teachers in the preschool to submit one or two written reflections
every week for seven years before the present action research study began. Although reflection
has been part of teachers’ job responsibility, the principal of the preschool was still frustrated
regarding the overall quality of teachers’ reflection. She expressed her frustration in the first
meeting with the researcher.

“It would not be fair to say that our teachers did not try to re-examine their teaching
process in their reflection at all. From time to time, we found inspiring and critical
thoughts in teachers’ reflection journals. However, I cannot really say that our teachers
are doing their reflection in a critical way so that reflection plays a critical role in their
professional development as it supposed to be.”

“Teachers themselves also were frustrated with how to deepen their reflection. Many of
them have mentioned that they also want to find out how to write deeper reflection
beyond what they have had”.

To help with the teachers, the school administration organized several workshops and
seminars on reflection skills before this action research study started.
A Model of Collective Teaching Reflection

The members of the research team systematically explored and experiment with several different methods and strategies to enhance the quality of their reflections during the four-semester study. These intensive efforts led the development of a practical model of collective teaching reflection in the preschool. As Figure 1 shows, the model consists of three interrelated methodological components: dialogue reflection journal, reflective seminar, and reflection portfolio. Each of the components has a distinctive focus and serves specific functions in the facilitation of teaching reflection. Dialogue reflection journal entries, represented by scattered points in Figure 1, provide teachers an avenue to reflect on their teaching practice while focusing on various topics and concerns. Reflections in journal entries correspond with teachers’ dynamic concerns in the teaching process and may not have a continuous focus or direction at all. With the reflection portfolio, teachers examine teaching practice using a series of theme-based reflections. Reflection portfolio allows teachers to reflect on a given aspect of their teaching practice in a systematic way across a relatively long period (e.g., a semester or an academic year). In Figure 1, dotted lines represent reflection portfolios. Each dot represents an individual reflection event in a reflection portfolio. All of the reflection events in a reflection portfolio share the same focus that provides a continuity of direction for teacher’s reflection in a given period. Dialogue reflection journal entries can be part of a teacher’s portfolio if closely related to the theme that a teacher chooses for his or her portfolio. With the reflective seminar, teachers in a school collectively reflect on common concerns or issues they may have in classrooms.

A common feature of the three methods is that they all involve intensive peer interactions and collaboration in supporting groups. When put into practice, the three methods interweave and relate to each other. As shown in Figure 1, when the same topic repeatedly shows up in reflection journal entries of different teachers, the topic becomes a discussion topic in a reflective seminar. Dialogue journal entries can be part of a reflection portfolio. In summary, the three methods of collective reflection in the model have different focuses and functions, all of which jointly support teaching reflection in the school.
Considering that teachers in the preschool have had years of experience in writing journals for reflection, the research team decided to focus on improving the effectiveness of the reflection journal at the very beginning of the study. In the literature, research has shown that writing reflection journals with interpersonal dialogues or discussions (commonly referred as dialogue reflection journal or interactive reflection journal) promoted deeper levels of reflection than individual reflection journal (Lee, 2010; Stillman, Anderson, & Struthers, 2014). Based on the literature, the research team decided to adopt a new social constructivist perspective (Collin & Karsenti, 2011) to improve teachers’ reflection journaling. The focus was to facilitating teaching reflection using meaningful dialogues among the teachers in the journaling process to promote deeper reflection (Figure 2).
The module of dialogue reflection journal that we developed during this study consists of three phases of reflection. It starts with “Initial Reflection”, in which a teacher writes a self-reflection of her own teaching practice just as she would do in an individual reflection journal. The reflection process, however, does not end with initial reflection, but continues with the two cycles of interpersonal dialogues among teachers. The first cycle of dialogue comes in as the teacher shares her initial self-reflection; and peer teachers comment on the teacher’s lesson plan and initial reflection. The final product of this cycle of dialogues is the development of a “Second-phase Reflection”, in which the teacher reconsiders her lesson designs and implementation as she responds to the comments and suggestions from peers. The goal of Second-phase Reflection is to prompt the teacher to reexamine the teaching process and lesson planning by taking a third-party standpoint or using alternative lens provided by other teachers.

What follows is an example of an Initial Reflection by a teacher and an example of how the first cycle of interpersonal dialogues about the Initial Reflection may go among a small group of teachers”:

**Why is Puzzle Not Interesting Any More?** (An Initial Reflection done by a teacher)

“C. Y. in my Pre-k class used to like puzzle game very much. He enjoys the game and tends to directly go to the learning center for it whenever it is free playtime in the past few weeks. However, I noticed that he recently seems to not be interested in the game as much as before. He still went for the puzzle game area at the beginning of free play. He can play for about three or five minutes. Then, he quit the game and went to other b centers. Because it is a sudden change in the behavioral pattern, I have been thinking...
what caused him lose interest in the game. There may be a couple of reasons why C. Y. lost his interest in the game all of the sudden. First, I realize that I recently put several 200-piece new puzzles in the area. The old puzzles are 100-piece and he already played them many times and is not interested in them anymore. So, whenever he went to the area, he chose the new games. But, these new puzzles may be too difficult for him to complete by himself. Second, I think that I have not given children much instruction on the methods and strategies by which they can complete a puzzle game successfully.

The below is a brief summary of the main points made in the dialogues between the teacher and peers.

Teacher W. J.: When I read your case and reflection, my first thought was that you may “jump” too quickly from 100-piece to 200-piece puzzles. That is a big difference in the difficult level of the game. You may want to include some 120-piece, 150-piece puzzles in the learning center before you introduce children 200-piece puzzles. I would, if I were you. Teacher T. G.: I would give students more scaffolding and play with them for several times whenever I give the new games with more pieces. That way, you can help children get ready to challenge themselves, rather than leaving them face to the challenge with less preparation. Teacher W. X.: My experience is that you can still make the old puzzles interesting if you let children play them in a contest. Children love contest. You may want to do a contest in the learning center. It may be make C. Y. and other kids love the puzzle games.”

The second cycle of dialogues usually occurs between a teacher and the curriculum coordinator of the school, someone who has expertise in curriculum development and classroom teaching. In this phase, the curriculum coordinator comments on a teacher’s Second-phase Reflection with prompts that can guide the teacher to analyze her teaching practice. The goal of this cycle of dialogues is to help the teacher find patterns in her decision-making and classroom teaching actions, to discover the rationale for her behaviors and actions, and/or to make connections between classroom teaching and pedagogical theories and principles. Examining the potential ethical issues in teaching can be also one goal in this phase. The product of this cycle of dialogues is the “Third-phase Reflection”, a reflection in which the teacher tries to answer deeper levels of questions previously not considered in either the Initial or Second-phase Reflections. Below is a sample of the dialogue between the curriculum coordinator and Teacher Wu about her case. The sample focuses on how the curriculum coordinator can use prompts (cited in parenthesis in the below quote) to facilitate further reflection.

C. Y. in my Pre-k class used to like puzzle game very much. He enjoys the game and tends to directly go to the learning center for it whenever it is free playtime in the past few weeks. However, I noticed that he recently seems to not be interested in the game as much as before. He still went for the puzzle game area at the beginning of free play (For me, it looks like that he is still interested in the puzzle). He can play for about three or five minutes. Then, he quit the game and went to other centers. Because it is a sudden change in the behavioral pattern, I have been thinking what caused him lose interest in the game.
There may be a couple of reasons why C. Y. lost his interest in the game all of the sudden. First, I realize that I recently put several 200-piece new puzzles in the area. The old puzzles are 100-piece and he already played them many times and is not interested in them anymore. So, whenever he went to the area, he chose the new games. But, these new puzzles may be too difficult for him to complete by himself (well, several things that need to be further considered here. Do you have puzzles between 100-piece and 200-piece in the center? Have you considered the issue that materials in a learning center, in general, should represent different levels in difficulty so that the materials may fit the needs of various children?) Second, I think that I have not given children much instruction on the methods and strategies by which they can complete a puzzle game successfully (That is a great thought for reflection. It is great to realize that scaffolding and challenging tasks in a learning center need to be synchronous. Apart from giving more instruction, have you thought about peer interaction in the learning center? Can you think of ways that peers can support with each other in completing those challenging puzzles?)

Dialogue journals facilitated a deeper level of reflection in teachers in the preschool than did individual reflection journals the teachers previously used for several reasons. First, dialogue reflection journals provide a platform in which teachers share and exchange their thoughts with peers. The interpersonal interactions among teachers introduce a third-party viewpoint to help a teacher to look into their own teaching practice from a very different perspective (Collin & Karsenti, 2011). The introduction of a third-party viewpoint makes it easier, both technically and emotionally, for a teacher to identify and confront the problems in her own teaching practice. Second, all teachers involved in this action research study agreed that developing a dialogue reflection journal helped them develop new ways to examine teaching practice as peers reacted to and challenged the teacher’s thoughts and classroom behaviors as reported in the Initial Reflection. A teacher commented in a focus group interview:

“It never occurred to me before that classroom issues could be examined with so many different perspectives along several dimensions ... The discussions that I had with colleagues in writing dialogue reflection journals really helped me realize those dimensions and perspectives that I had not thought of before”.

Thirdly, since a teacher has to respond to others’ comments in the second- and third-phase reflection, the anticipation of having to answer a variety of questions from peers may “force” a teacher to look into own teaching practice more seriously and acutely. This anticipation brings a stronger motivation that enhances the quality of reflection in the Initial Reflection phase. The same level of motivation may not occur in individual reflection journals. Finally, a unique feature of our module of a dialogue reflection journal is that the curriculum coordinator interacts with teachers in their reflection process on a regular basis. With her expertise in curriculum development and classroom teaching, the curriculum coordinator served as a mentor who scaffolds teachers to make connections between teaching practices and pedagogical theories or to look for the rationale and patterns for classroom actions.

To summarize, with the two cycles of dialogues among peers, the new module of dialogue reflection journals helped the teachers dig deeper into their thoughts in the reflection
process than previous individual reflection journals. With the support from their peers, teachers were able to reflect on their practices in more depth, as their peer teachers provided useful feedback, practical suggestions for improving practices, and at times, simply their own experiences in similar situations.

To deepen reflection with dialogue journaling, sustaining quality interactions among teachers is the key for success. Strategies that support good interactions among teachers include: encouraging teachers to develop a different “lens” to examine others’ initial reflections and provide comments; asking peers to challenge a teacher’s behaviors or actions reported in the initial reflection; providing inspiring prompts to a teacher’s initial self-reflection, using open-ended questions in comments (e.g., are there any other options for you to handle this in the classroom?); using online technology for timely communications; and providing teachers with a set of self-guiding questions for reflection. Of these strategies, the eight teachers in the research team agreed that the last two are the most helpful. With the use of online technology (mainly online discussion forums and online chatting software), teachers can read and comment on others’ reflection whenever they like. This promotes effective communications among teachers.

**Reflective Seminar**

As a method of collective reflection, the reflective seminar has a different focus than the dialogue reflection journal. The dialogue journal is personalized and centers around one individual’s teaching practice and relevant reflective thoughts, whereas the reflective seminar focuses on common problems and issues in teaching practices among a group of teachers.

During the study, our research team found that the best way to use the dialogue journal and reflective seminar to facilitate reflection is to have them complement each other. In general, we held reflective seminars to support teachers’ reflection whenever certain topics repeatedly emerged in different teachers’ reflection journals. Our experience showed that peer discussions involved in writing dialogue journals were perhaps the most important resources for the topics in reflective seminars. When teachers read and responded to others’ dialogue reflection journals, the discussions identified shared concerns among teachers. These common concerns naturally emerged from the journals to become the focus of reflective seminars. Apart from common concerns emerging in reflection journals, other topics for reflective seminars may include current hot issues related to curriculum development and implementation, topics that address new requirements of local school districts, or topics developed by the curriculum coordinator for training purposes.

Reflective seminars have two unique features that make the seminar a powerful tool for nurturing and sustaining quality reflection in teachers (Fazio, 2009). First, the seminars allow focused and in-depth face-to-face discussions among teachers, making it possible for teachers to respond immediately to comments and suggestions from peers. Second, reflective seminars provide an excellent platform for teachers to exchange their thoughts and ideas on common concerns and shared interests in teaching. As a result, teachers showed stronger motivation, engagement, and internal locus of control in the discussions in reflective seminars.
Teacher K. Y. I cherish every opportunity of communicating with peers in reflective seminars because I can always get solutions or answers to the problems in my own teaching from those seminars. Most times, these problems are something that have been puzzling me and made me confused for a while. For me, reflective seminars are great because I learn something new from them every time. I cannot wait to have more seminars. And I do believe that I can grow faster professionally with these seminars.

Teacher W.J. Doing reflection with peers in the seminars is a great and happy experience. The group reflection in the seminars had made reflection become a relaxing and enjoying thing, rather than a burden.

Sharing personal experiences in an open atmosphere is very important for reflective seminars. During the study, the research team found that reflective seminars were particularly useful in systematizing teachers’ practical knowledge by promoting rich experience sharing. As each teacher in a group shares what she did in the classroom scenarios provided by a group leader, the entire group quickly gained more relevant knowledge of teaching than an individual teacher could accumulate over the same period. As a novice teacher commented,

“I have learned so much on how to quickly and appropriately address a classroom issue in a particular situation in reflective seminars. The knowledge that I gained in the seminars is perhaps more than what I have learned from my own experience in the past three years. So, I am truly grateful that we held these reflective seminars”.

In addition, the research team found that reflective seminars played a critical role in guiding teachers to make connections between teaching practices and pedagogical theories and principles. Below, is a segment of a group discussion from a reflective seminar, in which the curriculum coordinator (the group leader for that day) tried to help teachers make connections between a classroom case and corresponding pedagogical principles with a series of prompts. The discussion concerned how to provide materials in learning centers to enhance children’s learning. The topic was originally from peer discussions on Teacher Wu’s initial reflection of the case, “Why are puzzles not interesting anymore?”

The Coordinator: Let us have a little bit more discussion of Teachers Wu’s case and other similar cases provided in the handouts. Based on your own experiences, what would be the most important considerations in preparing materials for learning centers?

Teacher S. B.: I think that the materials should match children’s current development levels. That is important to consider any time.


Teacher T. G.: I agree. I also think of gender difference. In general, I think that the materials we provide should have a good variety.

The coordinator: What do you mean by a good variety?
Teacher T. G.: I meant that we should provide different types of materials, the materials should represent different levels of difficulty, and the materials should are made of different things, etc.

The coordinator: That is a great point! Let us think of more on “different levels of difficulty”. How would you make sure that the materials represent different levels of difficulty?

Teacher T. G.: Let me use Teacher Wu’s case as an example. I would provide 120-piece and 150-piece puzzles in my learn center before I introduce 200-piece puzzles to the class. 200-piece puzzles for five-year-olds are too challenging without boosting their skills with less-piece puzzles first.

Teacher W.J.: You are right. I also realized that after I saw C. Y. response to the new 200-piece puzzles. My original though was to challenge him because he did so well in the old puzzle games.

The coordinator: That brings an excellent question for us to discuss next. How can we challenge children’s learning in the centers with appropriate material? How can we prepare children with the possible challenges brought by difficult activities and new materials in the centers?

The coordinator: That is a great discussion on challenging children with appropriate materials and timely scaffolding from teachers. My next question is that if the students have tired of old things in centers, what should we do with those old materials? Do we simply replace all of them with new materials? If not, what would be a good ratio for the old materials and new materials?

Teacher S.B.: Of course, we should not get rid of all old materials but keep some in the centers. I like a ratio of 70% old materials and 30% new materials. Teacher Z. J.: I think that old materials in centers are not necessarily boring to the kids, as long as you use them in a new and different way. For example, old puzzles can be used for dramatic play; can be used for contests, etc. The coordinator: We have talked about preparing appropriate materials for centers and what teachers should do to facilitate children’s activities and learning in the centers. How about peers? Have any of you thought about using peers to “teach” in the centers?

Teacher T. G.: Peers are very helping in centers. Children tend to have different levels of skills, different things to be good at. I think that a more capable peer can be the teacher in a center. Let me give you an example from my experience.

From the discussion, it is not difficult to see that most of the questions that the coordinator used in the seminar aimed at making connections between teachers’ classroom practice and pedagogical principles or theories. With reflective seminars like this, teachers with different backgrounds may benefit in distinctive ways. For novice teachers, reflective seminars
were a great resource for them to accumulate knowledge about teaching. For experienced teachers, as group leaders guided the group’s discussion, the reflective seminars became powerful tools to update their pedagogical knowledge by making connections between classroom events and pedagogical theories and principles. Regardless of the years that the teachers had worked in education, all teachers in our research team reported that reflective seminars helped them look into classroom issues and problems with more dimensions and perspectives.

In our experience, several key elements guarantee the success of a reflective seminar. First, a positive, open, and welcoming atmosphere is a prerequisite for a successful seminar (Lyons, 2010). Teachers need to feel that no one would judge their comments and personal experiences in a reflective seminar before they can open up and share their experiences. Second, the quality of group leaders’ prompts during discussions is critical for the success of a reflective seminar. This is because prompts have a big influence on how deeply and in what direction teachers’ discussion and reflection would go. In general, high quality prompts in a reflective seminar should not only encourage different opinions and perspectives among teachers, but also help teachers reflect on the assumptions and beliefs underlying their classroom behaviors (Table 2). Thirdly, based on our experience, role-playing is a great strategy that facilitates a deep level of reflection in teachers. In the reflective seminars, group leaders of the seminars often asked teachers to discuss classroom issues from given perspectives as they role-played students in their classrooms, a peer teacher working in the same classroom, a peer teacher with a very different background, a curriculum coordinator, a principal, and sometimes a curriculum expert from a university. By assigning particular roles to teachers in reflective seminars, group leaders “forced” teachers to look into classroom issues from a perspective that they generally would not take or not familiar with. According to the teachers, the role-playing strategy in reflective seminars had made them “think teaching practice with brand new lenses”.

Table 2
Sample Prompts Used by a Group Leader in a Reflective Seminar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What should be the most important considerations in preparing materials for learning centers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Should new materials completely replace old materials in the centers? If not, what would be a good ratio for the old materials and new materials for a good balance between familiarity and new stimulation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How can we challenge children’s learning in the centers through “difficult” material?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How we can prepare children with the possible challenges brought by difficult activities and new materials in centers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Which kind of scaffolding should a teacher provide to children to prepare them with coming challenging activities in centers? Can you provide any examples from your previous experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Apart from the teacher, who else can be the “teacher” in the learning center during free-play time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Why is it important to encourage peer interaction in centers? How would you do it?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Reflection Portfolio

The reflection portfolio is a set of materials that teachers collect over a period of time (e.g., a semester) to critically examine a given aspect of one’s own teaching practice through a series of focused reflections (Hughes & Moore, 2007; Oakley, Pegrum & Johnston, 2013). It may consist of a variety of materials, including video-typed lessons and related reflections, written lesson plans and related reflections, reflection journal entries on given topics, self-reflections on group seminars, and any other materials that a teacher believes can represent her efforts in improving her teaching or professional development on a given aspect through reflection (Hughes & Moore, 2007).

Reflection portfolios have distinctive features and functions differentiating them from dialogue reflection journals and reflective seminars. Like the dialogue reflection journal, the reflection portfolio is personalized and centered around individuals teachers’ personal interests and teaching activities. Unlike the dialogue reflection journal, the reflection portfolio is theme-based. Rather than reflecting on various concerns about teaching practice with scattered topics, a teacher may write a series of reflections on a theme in a reflection portfolio (Hughes & Moore, 2007). The theme of a reflection portfolio is usually pre-determined and generally reflects a teacher’s weaknesses in teaching practice or an area that a teacher wants to improve with a long-term goal. In addition, the reflection portfolio does not necessarily reflect on common concerns among a group of teachers, although it may involve considerable collaboration among group members. A unique feature of the reflection portfolio is that it allows teachers to study personal teaching philosophy and ethical issues with its focused and continuous reflection (Hughes & Moore, 2007). In our experience, when teachers developed a series of reflections for their reflection portfolios throughout the semester, they often found that a constant issue or problem in their teaching practice related to the underlying assumptions or teaching philosophy that they held. Without analyzing or changing these underlying assumptions or teaching philosophy, simply reflecting the technical issues alone cannot resolve the issue successfully and permanently.

Developing a quality theme-based reflection portfolio by oneself is challenging because it requires a teacher to continuously confront issues and problems in own practice over a long period. Often, a teacher may find herself having to confront issues on ethics, teaching philosophy, or teaching beliefs during the development of a reflection portfolio. For these reasons, peer collaboration and social support are critical for the successful use of reflection portfolio in schools. During the study, our research team adopted multiple methods to support the development of quality reflection portfolios. For example, we paired up two teachers who had chosen the same weakness areas to develop reflection portfolios in a given period. The pairs then met in the school several times during a semester to discuss their portfolios. We also used online group discussions to support the development of reflection portfolios on a larger scale. Within ongoing online discussions, a small group of teachers asked each other questions or obtained second opinions about their own reflection portfolios. We also encouraged the teachers to evaluate a peer teacher’s portfolio over a semester or semi-semester so that they can provide useful feedback on things requiring further reflection in their portfolios.
Conclusion

In a four-semester action research study, the researcher worked together with eight teachers and the curriculum coordinator of a preschool in a research team and jointly explored and evaluated the efficacy of several specific methods and strategies to improve teaching reflection in a school setting. The action research study has led to the development of a practical model of collective teaching reflection as presented in the current paper. The model consists of three interrelated components: dialogue reflection journal, reflective seminar, and reflection portfolio. Although each of them has its own focus and distinctive functions in facilitating teaching reflection, the common feature of the three components is that they all involve intensive peer collaborations and cannot function effectively without supporting groups.

Based on our practice in this action research study, it appears that peer interactions in supporting groups can fundamentally improve teaching reflection; and collaborations among colleagues within supporting groups can nurture and sustain quality reflection in individual teachers in school settings. Rather than being a purely individual and introspective activity, teaching reflection can be an interpersonal activity partially based on individuals’ introspection. I concur with other researchers in the teacher education field that reflection has a social dimension (e.g., Convery, 1998) and future research on this topic should focus on this previously overlooked dimension of reflection in order to improve reflective teaching practice in schools.

References


