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Beyond Reflection: Teacher Learning as Praxis

Reflection is increasingly used as a means to support teacher professional development, and ultimately to support teachers' efforts to improve the persistent underachievement of minority students. In this article, we identify the limits of the traditional view of reflection, argue that reflection is an artifact and a practice embedded in a larger process, namely teacher learning, and outline basic notions of a cultural-historical vision of learning as praxis in which reflection is embedded. Further, we argue that a new vision of critical, situated reflection must include both technical and political content and be based on a dialogic approach.

TEACHER REFLECTION IS CONSIDERED an important means for developing subject matter, pedagogical, and pedagogical-content knowledge about how to teach. Within current test driven reforms, prepackaged curricula focus teacher reflection on efficiency and technical implementation. Reflection is generally treated as an isolated skill (Giroux, 1985; Lindsay & Mason, 2000); the link between teacher

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reflection and learning mediated by various artifacts¹ is not systematically addressed.

Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983) have argued that teachers' work is complex and requires deep and foundational reflective practices. Because teachers work in increasingly diverse schools where equity issues, multiple contradictory reforms, and power differentials abound (Ladson-Billings, 1999), reflection defined as a technical and isolated skill is insufficient to support meaningful teacher learning. Moreover, the experiences and status of racial minorities in schools require teachers to develop a political consciousness about the technical skills they are asked to acquire. In this way, teachers avoid having their work become "nothing more than the dissemination of rhetoric" (Morrow & Torres, 1995, p. 268) and thus subverting the equity their labor purports to accomplish. Reflection that develops a political consciousness might involve teachers "integrat[ing] curriculum around concepts and issues" that would be of current interest to both student and teacher, or "focus[ing] on inquiry and us[ing] literature to support that inquiry," thus helping their students "not only to be problem-solvers, but to become problem-posers" (Crawford et al., 1994, p. 174). As Freire (1972) has argued, problem posing and learner-generated avenues of reflection require teachers to be learners who become enlisted in self-emancipation rather than mere implementation.

However, Freire suggested consciousness alone is not sufficient; it must coexist with meaningful praxis. We define praxis as the dialectical union of reflection and action; praxis is at the heart of human nature since human “activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis it requires theory to illuminate it” (Freire 1972, p. 96).

The purpose of this article is to outline a vision of teacher reflection that is constitutive of teacher learning as praxis. The theoretical basis of this discussion is framed by (a) the legacy of Freire’s education for freedom and (b) cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999). These frameworks are well suited to address the contemporary challenges teachers face due to their explicit link between reflection-action and culture-learning, and their attendant concern for power. Before we outline this vision, we review briefly traditional conceptualizations of reflection.

Reflection and Its Limits

Since Dewey (1933), teacher reflection has been seen as an important avenue for enhancing teacher labor (Schön, 1983; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). However, reflection on technical competence is ubiquitous. Disjunctures between K-12 school cultures that focus reflection solely on technical matters and the ideas teachers develop or receive in their teacher education programs often conflate the substance of teacher reflection (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Morrison argued that teachers do not explicitly reference educational theory in their reflection, and Tickle found that while teachers reflect easily on technical issues, “the elements of aims and values of educational theory were not a matter for extensive deliberation” (cited in Lindsay & Mason, 2000, p. 120). The majority of initial teacher reflection focuses on rule-governed practice, or how practice reflects or conforms to predetermined criteria (Lindsay & Mason, 2000).

Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983) argued for a proactive and learner-centered form of reflection in which the practitioner becomes the owner of, and subject in, the process of his or her own reflection. Central to this vision of reflection is consideration and action about the socio-historical and institutional contexts in which students are educated,

particularly those from racially marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 1999). However, there are two issues related to a critical perspective on reflection. First, this view does not always make explicit how power issues intersect with culture and learning. Second, there is evidence that teachers are not always receptive to a critical perspective on reflection (Johnson, 2001; Zeichner, 1990); the problem is framed as one of resistance. The challenge becomes, therefore, how to create conditions for and support of reflection and learning so teachers become professionals committed to social justice education in schools serving predominantly working-class minority students. Before we grapple with this challenge, we outline how reflection has been addressed in the literature.

Discourse communities in teacher reflection

Critiquing technical reflection (van Manen, 1977) has helped to widen the definition, content, and purposes of teacher reflection beyond more efficient implementation of professional practice. Several discourse communities in teacher reflection have arisen around this critique—phenomenological, critical, and situated learning (Ovens, 2002). They highlight how teacher reflection itself is “mobilised in particular contexts for particular political, pedagogical, and phenomenological purposes” (Ovens, 2002, p. 507).

Phenomenological² discourse community. The main feature of this discourse is its focus on the individual and her or his experiences as the source for reflection, because teachers craft their own knowledge through reflection upon their prior experiences. Scholars such as Dewey, van Manen, and Schön laid the groundwork for this discourse as they differentiated between reflective versus routine action, suggesting levels of reflection, and qualifying the temporal experience of reflection as occurring either in the moment or after the moment of action (Ovens, 2002). Teacher reflection is comprised of self-awareness often achieved through introspection—both in the moment and after—through journals, scrapbooks, or other repositories of personal experience.

While the content can be critical, Johnson (2001) has critiqued this discourse on two levels, namely (a) it does not incorporate an aspect of

reflection in which teachers return to their own experience with new eyes garnered through the mediation of artifacts, and (b) it does not challenge the apolitical, liberal humanist world view of its own discourse.

Critical discourse community. Zeichner (1990) and others have argued for a critical reflection through which teachers could conceive of their work in broader terms that incorporate sociopolitical contexts of teaching in addition to curricular and pedagogical concerns. While its immediate purview is to critique the phenomenological approach's reliance solely on personal experience, the critical discourse community is still focused on the individual and his or her quest for emancipation. This quest focuses teachers on the politics surrounding the means and objectives of education and, in the tradition of critical theory, on the need for social action. As such, this community utilizes the personal narratives of oppressed members of society as well as other artifacts (e.g., statistics, arguments) to modify teacher beliefs mainly through a critical analysis of content as the source for change. Artifact usage in reflection is an important contribution from this community; however, as it is focused on individual emancipation, little attention is given to the situated nature of teacher reflective practices.

Situated learning discourse community. The situated learning discourse community emphasizes the shared nature of reflection through three concepts: situated activity, reflection as a social endeavor, and reflection as a distributed process with distributed content (i.e., the situation, the group, and the artifacts utilized in reflection that permeate this discourse). Reflection is understood as a process that is embedded in everyday activities situated in school cultures that are social in nature, where interactions with others are an important medium in which reflection occurs. Teachers interact with colleagues in goal-directed activities that require communication and the exchange of ideas where reflection itself is not contained wholly in the mind of the individual but is "distributed" through sign systems and artifacts that are embedded in the social activity of the school community. For example, team teaching and collaborative planning typically require teachers to discuss their beliefs and practices within the routines of

their daily work. In this social context teachers' thinking, action, and reflection on their teaching incorporate different artifacts (people, concepts, district standards). As teachers participate in the practices of the community and use strategies and artifacts according to the institutional requirements of their school community, reflection itself becomes constrained or supported in particular ways. While improving on the individualistic focus of the other discourse communities, the situated learning discourse community rarely interrogates issues of power or the plight of minorities. Clearly a synthesis is required for a new form of reflection.

Most teacher educators and professional developers do not have a history of reflecting on topics such as multiculturalism. Case studies of teacher education programs based on reflection reveal that issues of social and political curriculum transformation are generally avoided, misinterpreted, or resisted (Vavrus & Ozcan, 1996, p. 3). Teacher education and professional development programs ought to authorize more complex discourses about reflection and teacher learning. Following are a few foundational concepts of a cultural historical vision informed by Freire's legacy of critical education.

A Cultural-Historical View of Teacher Learning as Praxis

We envision reflection as a tool that is constitutive of a larger process (i.e., learning) that unfolds in activity systems. Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) addresses social theory's longstanding tension between the individual and society by adopting the "activity system" as the unit of analysis. Engestrom explains that an activity system integrates the actors in a given situation, the artifacts being used (including material and ideational artifacts), as well as the object³ oriented aspect of human behaviors. The notion of the activity system incorporates the productive and communicative aspects of people's conduct (Engestrom et al., 1999).

Thus, how teachers use reflection must be understood as situated in the activity systems of teacher education programs, classrooms, schools, and professional development events. At the same time, historical residua are found in all activity systems (i.e., there are normative assumptions embedded in the

activity systems in which teachers are educated and work). Ubiquitous historical residua in U.S. schools include definitions of teaching and learning that are acontextual, acultural, apolitical, and ahistorical (Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994). An important implication is that a CHAT perspective should account for the cultural and political dimensions of learning and reflection. In short, teacher reflection could capitalize on the situated learning and critical discourse communities for a fuller range of reflective methods and content. Next, we outline three basic notions of this view.

Teacher reflection and learning emerge in social practice

A key premise of CHAT is the social origin of learning. It emerges first in a social plane (in relations between people) and is subsequently appropriated as a psychological category. As John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) explain, “all higher psychological functions are internalized relationships of the social kind, and constitute the social structure of personality” (p. 192). Reflection without participation is as impossible as thought without language.

Teacher reflection in social context occurs as teachers engage in and share their reflections in diverse ways. The goal-directed nature of human activity in cultural contexts supports learning environments where people collaborate, use artifacts, strategize solutions to problems, and rely on other, more experienced members of the activity system. For example, several teachers working in urban multicultural schools might voluntarily gather on a monthly basis to study their own professional practice as it relates to addressing the needs of minority students. Inquiry and deep reflection drive their meetings and define this micro community within the school. Whether through writing, speaking, or simply listening as a peripheral member of the activity system, teachers are participating in the construction of knowledge as well as crafting identities within the activity system of this inquiry group. Roles that people are expected to play in the inquiry group are established through the negotiation and configuration of routines. Over time, the group’s practices develop histories that index normative ways of acting and belonging in the inquiry community. These practices reveal the values

and expectations of the group. Teachers function as resources for one another, providing each other with guidance and assistance on which to build new ideas. As newcomers try on new roles or develop analytic or reflective dispositions and skills through the assistance of others, they will eventually attempt on their own to use artifacts (material, ideal) in novel situations. This shift from assisted to independent use of tools indicates learning—the transfer of cognitive functions from the social to the psychological plane. Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)⁴ suggests that reflection would be impossible without this socially guided participation. From this perspective, therefore, assistance strategies should enlist novices to *perform* the desired practices of the inquiry group (e.g., critical reflection about how race enters professional practices) *before* they become fully *competent* in the use of such practices (Cazden, 1993).

Teacher reflection and learning are culturally mediated

All human activities are culturally mediated and entail the use and transformation of artifacts. From this perspective, culture itself mediates human actions in the sense that it is a system of shared meanings or social inheritances embodied in the artifacts of a given social structure (Cole, 1999). Returning to our example of a teacher inquiry group, the teachers may have established a culture in which reflection and inquiry are the normative ideal artifacts by which they learn. In addition, they may bring material artifacts from their classrooms, such as student work or textbooks, that also mediate their discourse. Metacognitive and cognitive mediation are the main mechanisms people use to mediate their actions (Karpov & Haywood, 1998). Metacognitive mechanisms include self-regulation tools (e.g., self-monitoring, self-planning, self-evaluating), where cognitive mechanisms include the use of tools needed for subject-domain problem solving. In one sense, therefore, we are using the notion of reflection as a metacognitive mechanism that teachers can use to regulate their own practice before, during, and after teaching. As we explain in the next section, however, we also construe reflection as a social practice.

Teachers also mediate their labor through cognitive mechanisms as they learn scientific concepts (i.e., systems of interconnected constructs that explain a domain of study) (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996), such as theories of learning, pedagogical models, and theories of racial minorities' underachievement. In addition, teachers mediate their actions with spontaneous concepts. These concepts are not conscious and are often derived from "scripts" (i.e., generalized representations of recurring events derived from direct experience). Scripts embody sequences of events that are contextualized wholes such as story telling (what constitutes a story and how it should be told) (Karpov & Haywood, 1998). As the person participates in scripts over time, spontaneous concepts are formed (e.g., the concept of what being smart means) during classroom discussions that may require aggressive bidding for turns to answer factual questions. Concepts, however, are not created and used in a vacuum; they embody histories of meanings and use, and groups ascribe them differential status.

Journals or virtual systems of communication can be used to mediate teacher learning so they can recall, share, and respond to one another's experiences (Blanton, Simmons, & Warner, 2001). Johnson (2001), for example, proposes a two-stage narrative inquiry in which teachers question the assumptions inherent in their own narratives to stimulate critical teacher reflection and political praxis. This way, learning as praxis that involves reflection and action can be based on a "double-move" (Hedegaard, 1998) between (a) personal experience (e.g., in classrooms) and (b) theoretical sense-making (through journal writing or in teacher study group discussions). In such a view, the movement between experience (action) and reflection (theoretical sense-making) remains in dialectical tension, thus, building cycles of critical praxis.

Modeling activity systems for proleptic praxis

We have alluded thus far to two levels of artifacts, primary and secondary. Primary artifacts are "those directly used in production" such as words, curriculum materials, and writing instruments (Cole, 1996, p. 121). Secondary artifacts, in turn, are "representations of primary artifacts and of modes of action using primary artifacts" (e.g.,

beliefs, norms) (Cole, 1996, 121). Teachers rely on primary and secondary artifacts to reflect on their own practice. In addition, there are tertiary artifacts. Tertiary artifacts "can come to constitute a relative autonomous world" (Cole, 1996, p. 121). Teachers can construct these envisioned worlds as social spaces in which cultures of praxis (reflection + action) are created, negotiated, and transformed to promote teacher learning. From this perspective, reflection is more than a metacognitive mechanism, it is constituted in social practice. For instance, tertiary artifacts can take the form of after-school inquiry groups where teachers study and reflect with the purpose of learning and transforming their own professional practice with minority students and the school in which they work. These tertiary artifacts are engineered to have their own cultures (i.e., artifacts, rules, roles, and community assumptions, values, and norms).

For example, the object of these groups could be defined as achieving an equitable organization of learning opportunities for students (particularly minorities). These tertiary artifacts can be built around rules of collaborative work in which teachers use artifacts such as inquiry strategies (e.g., case study research), reflection, or social justice theories to analyze the political dimension of education, teaching and learning theories/strategies, social theories of difference and oppression, and the like. Teachers could also be expected to adopt multiple roles depending on the activities of the group and assume for example the role of critical peer, problem-poser (e.g., presenter of case study evidence), or expert on a given topic.

As stated previously, the telos of praxis is to become an organic intellectual and contribute to a social transformation project. For this purpose, a critical practice in this kind of tertiary artifact is the use of proleptic praxis (Artiles, Gutiérrez, & Rueda, 2002). Prolepsis is "the representation or assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished" (Cole, 1999, p. 89). Prolepsis is ubiquitous in human development since it is through prolepsis that the ideal dimension of culture materializes in the organization of environments. Let's imagine, for example, a mother observing her child engage in aggressive behavior with another child. The mother envisions a *future* for her child as a caring adult

that is respectful of others and that avoids aggression. She then travels to her *past* to remember how aggression was handled with her as she was growing up. And she comes back to the *present* to act informed by her imagined future and remembered past; this way, culture materializes to organize the environment in the present.

Teachers can engage in proleptic praxis by reflecting on their current practice as informed by (a) a vision of a future for their minority students and (b) a critical understanding of hegemony as a pedagogical relationship in their own lives and in contemporary U.S. society (since it is both coercive and consensual) (Morrow & Torres, 1995). This means teacher inquiry groups need to articulate principles of practice and a vision of the kind of educational system needed to achieve parity of outcomes for all students, while they develop a deep historical understanding of hegemony's impact on their own lives and the biographies of minorities in a race conscious society (e.g., the structural roots of discrimination that curtail access to the resources and experiences that minorities are systematically denied in U.S. society). More importantly, teacher inquiry groups need to identify or develop alternative mechanisms and strategies to address the implications of such future visions and historical imagination (i.e., to jointly develop the means to act upon their reflection).

Key to the life of these tertiary artifacts is the development of a collective identity in which teachers strive to acquire and continually transform a social language. A social language is "a discourse peculiar to a specific [societal group—e.g., professional or ethnic group] at a given time" (Holquist & Emerson, as cited in Wertsch, 1991, p. 57). As teachers summon a social language, they reveal the values and beliefs of the social group in which they are participating. These tertiary artifacts need to be grounded in a social language that affords critical analyses of race, culture, and social justice, embody a vision of learning and good practice, and foreground images of social justice educators.

Conclusion

Teacher reflection is an important contribution to the scholarship on teacher education and development. We advance several ideas that enrich this

notion. First, we situate reflection in the more complex construct of teacher learning and use CHAT to account for culture in learning. This allows us to envision teachers as cultural historical beings that work in politically charged institutional contexts. Because racial diversity is rapidly becoming the norm in the nation's schools, we argue teachers cannot afford to ignore the power differentials and struggles experienced by racially marginalized groups; thus teachers need to reflect on the political and historical dimensions of their labor.

We frame reflection as both a metacognitive mechanism and a social practice, since CHAT allows for the engineering of activity systems in which teachers mediate their own learning with others through reflection, inquiry, and other artifacts and practices. We hope this vision of reflection helps to debunk the image of the reflective practitioner as an isolated apolitical professional and promotes the authorization of a new breed of professional knowledge that is mindful of issues of learning, culture, power, and social justice.

Notes

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1. Artifacts are defined as "an aspect of the material world that has been modified over the history of its incorporation into goal-directed human action. By virtue of the changes wrought in the process of their creation and use, artifacts are simultaneously *ideal* (conceptual) and *material*. They are ideal in that their material form has been shaped by their participation in the interactions of which they were previously a part and which they mediate in the present" (Cole, 1996, p. 117). Examples of artifacts include books, people (material); and concepts, beliefs (ideal).
2. Phenomenology is "a philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness" (Houghton Mifflin Company (2000). Consistent with this definition, this discourse community focuses on the individual's personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
3. The object defines the meaning and context of actions within activity systems as the object of an

activity overshadows and motivates all activity. "The *object* refers to the 'raw material' or 'problem space' at which the activity is directed and which is molded or transformed into *outcomes* with the help of physical or symbolic, external and internal *tools* (mediating instruments and signs)" (Engestrom, 1993, p. 67).

4. Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

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