

3rd International Pedagogies and Learning Conference, 27-28 September, 2007

**Beginning Early Childhood Teachers: challenging personal construct
as “teacher” through a critically reflective lens¹**

Karen Noble

University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

Relatively high rates of teacher attrition have been consistently identified as a major issue for the teaching profession over several decades. As a result, there has been a growing interest in the wellbeing of teachers across the entire education sector. One of the tools employed by teachers is that of reflection, in order to evaluate their own practice and the practices of others, with a view to developing their professional identity (Fleer, 2000; Goodfellow, 1995; MacNaughton & Williams, 1998; Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2006; Sumsion, 2003). This paper describes a process of critical reflection on-action and in-action with a cohort of early childhood education (ECE) students that has been developed to support the student to become a critically reflective practitioner who can ‘think otherwise’ about practice and who is receptive to new epistemology. A thematic analysis has been used to explore how students understood their involvement in this critical reflection process as a means of promoting improvement in practice, professionalism and life-long professional development as they move into the field. The aim, to better understand the ways in which involvement engaged students in processes that allowed them to construct new epistemological understandings informed by theory, research and practice, drove this project. The author therefore posits that a collaborative process of critical reflection provides the space for “new possibilities to be explored and realized” (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.145), allowing those engaged in this space to construct, rather than reproduce, knowledge (Noble, 2006).

Introduction

The preparation of graduates to work effectively in the early childhood education and care sector is of particular relevance in times of dramatic policy reform (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2001; Prout, 2003). Graduates entering the workforce can find themselves working in contexts of which they have limited experience. As such, preparatory university programs of study need to reflect these changes and ensure that undergraduate degree programs that are offered do indeed meet the ever-changing needs of the students that enroll, providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills that are transferable across this broad community sector.

¹ Paper presented at 3rd International Conference on Pedagogies and Learning 2007, 26-28 Sept 2007, Springfield, Queensland.

Generally, although there is an awareness of the plight of struggling beginning teachers, at national and state/territories levels across Australia, evidence suggests that, to date, any attempts to redress the current “state of play” have been less than effective (Noble, Goddard & O’Brien, 2003). Historically, the teaching profession is notorious for having high attrition rates (Brock & Grady, 1996) and as such, this issue continues to also impact on pre service teacher education programs. The development of professional identity can be enhanced through the provision on ongoing opportunities for students to challenge their sense of teaching and of themselves as teachers (Hebert & Worthy, 2001). There is a need to find new ways of exploring the theory practice nexus in relation to how students see themselves as emerging professionals in the workplace and how their undergraduate teacher preparation program can enable, rather than constrain their development of a sustainable professional identity as ‘teacher’.

The beginning teacher

Within the literature describing the experiences of beginning teachers (Berliner, 1988; Dempster, Sim, Beere & Logan, 2000; Elkerton, 1984; Fimian & Blanton, 1987; Fuller, 1969; Ryan, 1986; Williams, 1995) themes of initial overwhelm and subsequent progression towards competence and proficiency as a teacher are common. In fact, research undertaken with beginning teachers has consistently reinforced the need for on-going professional support, quite apart from supervision, for constructive reflection and on-going learning about the teaching and socialisation processes that the beginning teacher is required to master upon entry to the profession (Noble, Goddard & O’Brien, 2003).. The induction of beginning teachers into the profession is described in the literature with descriptors such as confusing, stressful, exhausting and disheartening, and Ryan’s (1986) warning about a ‘curve of disenchantment’, a curve which reaches its low point in the teachers first year of service is still as relevant today as it was over 20 years ago. There is an indication that much of the difficulty associated with working in this field is symptomatic of the uncertainty, discontinuity and insecurity characteristic of the post-modern condition (Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Jenks, 1996a, 1996b; Lyotard, 1984; Prout, 2003a, 2003b).

As previously stated, the undergraduate teacher education program generally is seen as an emergence towards competence. There is an emphasis on providing the pre service teacher with the knowledge and skills required for ‘successful’ practice, moving from dependence towards independence. The development of a professional identity appears to be a key element in this transition. Flores & Day (2005) describe this process as an “ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences” (p.220). Clandinin & Connelly (1995) refer to such a

process as “the storying of teachers’ lives, they are the characters in their own stories of teaching, which they author” (p.12). How they construct their story is shaped by the communities in which they live as well as their personal beliefs and values of what it means to be a teacher.

This paper explores an innovative approach to preparing students for the complex nature of the work of teaching, by way of the development of a space within a community of practice, in which students and university academic staff engage in a collaborative process of critical reflection to interrogate practice and to make connections to relevant theoretical frameworks as they seek to negotiate the complexities of engaging in practice across social and disciplinary boundaries. This project was based on the premise that the development of professional identity enables one to contribute new knowledge to any inquiry. It is important to implement methods that allow for “alternative” understandings of particular truths to be explored over time. Such a process makes available a better understanding of how theory relates to practice and how present ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980) constrain and enable individuals. Through such a process comes a privileging of the personal and emotional components to professional development, where individual meaning-making is seen as critical to exploring one’s professional identity.

Imagination and reflection

What is apparent is being able to imagine new ways of interpreting their development of identity as ‘teacher’ is crucial to future success. One method of exploring imaginatively their growing professional identity is through the development of metaphors to help them identify their beliefs and practices. The relevance of imagination in education was highlighted by Dewey (1933) when he spoke about the fusion of the intellectual and the emotional, the meaning and the value as well as the imaginative moving one beyond the facts towards the realms of possibility. Therefore, being able to imagine one’s future practice is important to understanding one’s professional identity. However, what is equally apparent is that while the use of metaphor to imagine themselves as ‘teacher’ is an important step in the development of professional identity, when coupled with the process of reflection, far greater gains in such development becomes possible (Clandinin & Connolly, 1996; Schon, 1987; Zeichner & Lidston, 1996). Articulating and reflecting upon their thinking about teaching, through critical reflection with others, can be a powerful means for pre service teachers to understand themselves better in terms of the contexts in which they may find themselves working with young children and their families. Beauchamp (2006) speaks to such a process as “leading to the discovery and assessment of personal meaning” to “personal transformations and self development” (p.86).

Within the early childhood community of practice (ECE CoP), a process of critical reflection on-action and in-action with students that has been developed to support the student to become a critically reflective practitioner who can ‘think otherwise’ about practice and who is receptive to new epistemology. Throughout each semester, all ECE students (regardless of their enrolment or offer) will be able to engage in regular professional conversations, face-to-face or virtually. This space then becomes the vehicle that assists to drive student and academic involvement in the social dynamic associated with the ‘community of practice’ approach to ongoing exploration, investigation and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1992; Wenger, 1998) about their changing professional identity. To be beneficial to all stakeholders, it “crucially involves participation as a way of learning—of both absorbing and being absorbed in—the “culture of practice. An extended period of legitimate peripherality provides learners with opportunities to make the culture of practice theirs” (Lave and Wenger, 1992, p. 95). Wenger (1998) also acknowledges the strength of imagination in assisting in the formation of self identity for all participants in a community of practice. He highlights the fact that engagement in such practice as the development and reflection upon one’s own metaphor not only benefits the individual, but that by engaging with others in such a practice, they are also able to become involved in the professional development of others. He sees the concept of educational imagination as a “different kind of work of the self – one that concerns the production of images of the self and images of the world that transcend engagement” (p.177). Such a process enables all participants to look at themselves and their particular contexts with a new perspective, “taking a distance and seeing the obvious anew and of being aware of the multiple ways we can interpret our lives” (Wenger, 1998, p. 272).

Imagining the metaphor: the conceptual framework

There are a variety of methods by which the imaginative reflections of pre-service teachers might be explored (see Ben-Peretz, 2001; Conway, 2001; Eisner, 1979; Moon, 2004; Wagner, Brock & Agnew, 1994). However, in this instance, each of the participants was asked to independently construct a personal meaning metaphor in relation to their developing identity as a teacher, and they were encouraged to use whatever method they preferred to represent this. The discussion that framed this task supported the notion that they were cognizant of the need to not only reflect back on the experiences that had shaped their professional identity to date, but that equally, they could use this situation to anticipate or look ahead to what their future practices and beliefs might be. The students were also aware that by the end of the week they were going to be invited to share their metaphor with others in the ECE CoP and to be engaged in a process of critical reflection. All participants chose to use visual images or words, or a combination of the two. Once the initial stage of brainstorming was complete, the

students were encouraged over the remainder of the week to go back to their metaphor and to independently reflect and refine their thinking before coming together as a group.

The use of metaphor here is seen as a powerful means of capturing the way in which each individual conceptualizes the work that they are doing/will do in the future. It is also a way in which they and others can gain insight into another person, to better understand the thoughts, perspectives, knowledge, ideals and values (Omstein, 1999) that can serve as a “master switch” (Tobin, 1990) for their own critical self reflective practices.

Process of critical reflection

Through the process of privileging critical reflection in-action and on-action, the ECE CoP becomes a space whereby all participants experiment, try out ideas, take risks, tackle and puzzle over problems, think, reflect, listen, discuss, ask questions, look up information, surprise themselves and each other. Such processes are supported by poststructural thinking as it promotes the notion of being informed by multiple perspectives in theory and in practice. Thus, reflective practice can be understood and improved by the use of a four-step model that includes the following stages – deconstruct, confront, theorise, think otherwise:

Table 1: Process of Critical Reflection (from Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2005)

To **deconstruct** work with young children, to pull apart the main tenets of theory that govern particular practices and closely examine its make up, especially practices that have been enshrined as ‘normal’ and ‘proper’ practice

To **confront** educational issues translates as approaching the issues head on by examining difficult, previously thought of as ‘untouchable’ topics

To **theorise** is to carefully consider teaching practice at all levels and question what is and what could be by thinking broadly and by using a range of non-dominant discourses from which to draw

To **think otherwise** is to challenge oneself to think outside the dominant discourses framework and come up with other ways, or better ways of thinking about and practising teaching (teaching and learning)

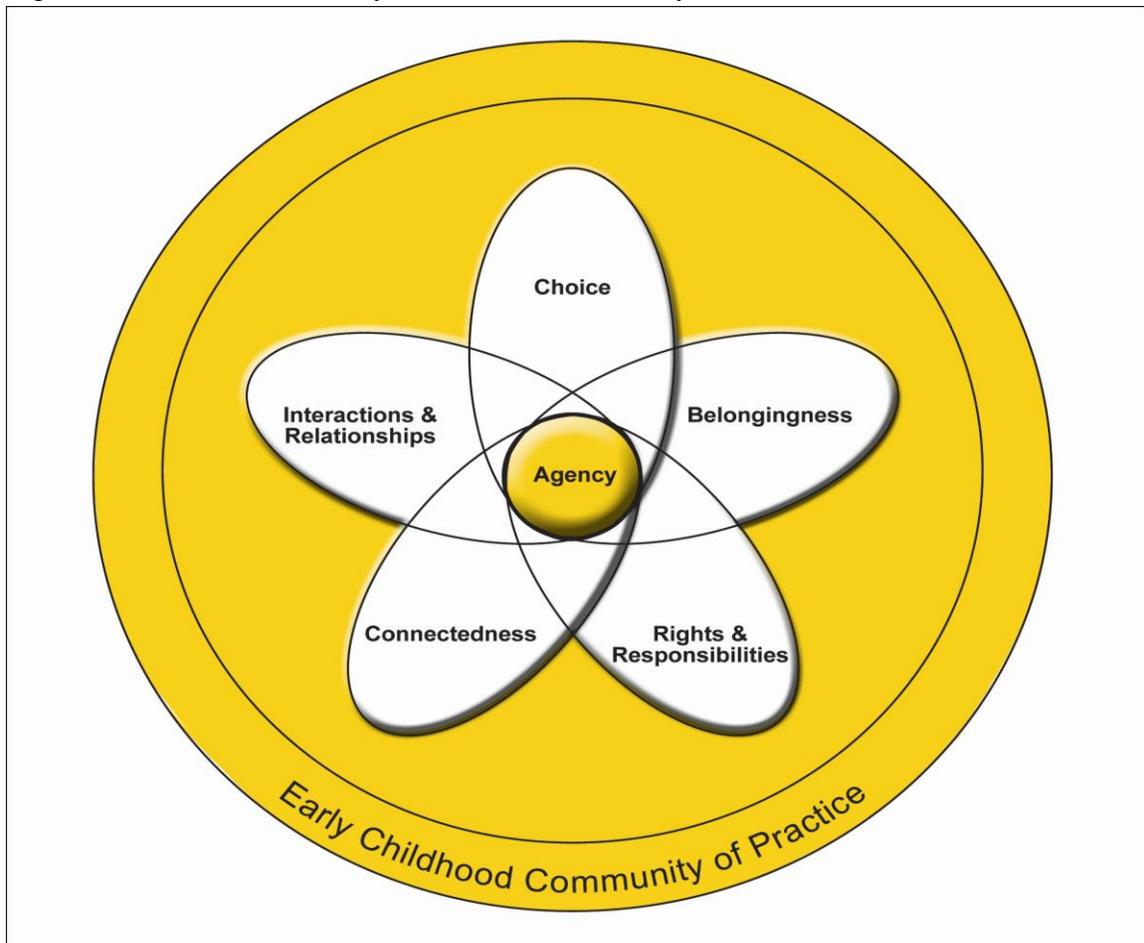
This process of critical reflection within the context of the ECE CoP is designed to bring about a sense of agency for all participants. As such, the contextual elements that are of significance are:

- Interactions and relationships: All participants (facilitators and learners) have the responsibility to find out what they know and what they are capable of. Therefore, within in this learning context, effective communication processes must be established, where it is acknowledged that all stakeholders have equal rights.
- Rights and responsibilities: What the learner chooses to do in order to explore a particular issue is perfectly appropriate. There is no assumption that the learning outcomes be investigated in a prescriptive way. Neither should the learner be stressed by the processes of critical reflection. Therefore, the learner should have the right to explore experiences and knowledge as he/she so chooses. An expectation that each learner is entitled to express his/her reactions to the learning tasks, but has a concomitant obligation to do so in an appropriate way. Therefore, rights are understood to be reciprocal.
- Choice: Within the connected curriculum context, the individual learner has the right to disagree with his/her peers in terms of how to engage with particular learning experiences, but that there is equally an expectation that the other learners have the right to disagree and make choices in the same way. However, these choices are framed in terms of their being a joint responsibility to develop a greater awareness and understanding of how each person can work together to achieve the fullest potential of any given situation.
- Belongingness: This tenet highlights the need for the individual learner to feel safe and secure in their choice to engage with the learning outcomes in whatever way he/she chooses. It is imperative that the participants develop a sense of belonging to the social learning context and that they understand their own subjectivity in terms of their learning dispositions. Belongingness then attends to the notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).
- Connectedness: Implicit in this approach is the fundamental need for learners to have interactions and relationships with others so as to form a network that supports their ongoing learning and development of professional identity. In this way, a sense of connectedness needs to exist for supportive networks to develop and for experiences to be meaningful. We aim to develop new kinds of bonds to become possible through the linking of the face-to-face and real-time virtual community of practice.

Together, the application of these contextual elements impacts upon the quality of interactions, relationships and friendships that actually occur for the participants in the learning process and their impacts upon the individual's professional and personal

identity. Agency cannot exist within relationships and practice unless there is a balancing of power relations and the presence of all characteristics (outlined in Figure 1) It is argued then that the necessary professional skills and knowledge needed to work effectively with children and their families are central to the aims of this curriculum reconceptualisation. New measures are called for in addressing the complexities of changed work/life demands and social contexts of higher education as traditional approaches to pre-service teacher education are proving ineffective and inefficient. Additionally, the contexts of practising teachers demand new kind of competencies and that is the strength of the ECE CoP, as it integrates many elements regarded essential in effective high quality learning and practice, such as self-directed, autonomous learning, critical and reflective thinking skills, and the integration of discipline specific knowledge and skills.

Figure 1: Context of the Early Childhood Community of Practice (ECE CoP)



The coupling of two: Notions of agency

In the development and subsequent sharing of each individual's metaphor of their recognition of their developing professional identity within the ECE CoP, the interest here was on the marriage of metaphor and critical reflection, or what Stengle (1997) refers to as the transitive knowledge, the "moral knowledge arising out of connection

with other persons and the world” (p.26). The key quality that became the focus of our investigation was the ability of the metaphor to act as a powerful connecting agent between the cohorts’ developing ideas of teaching and themselves in the role of teacher. According to Wong (1993) when ideas are expressed in terms of another, we are able to expand our experience of similarities, rather than building separate categories. When exploring the construction of the metaphor and facilitating the dialogue with others in relation to their metaphorical understandings, the individual is able to think meta cognitively about the purposes of teaching and their vision of their desired role as teacher.

Examples of the evolving metaphors from students

The following section of the paper presents excerpts from some of the student personal meaning metaphors that were developed within the above outlined process within the ECE CoP. The discussion of the metaphors took place in a small group with a learning circle approach, where all participants engaged in the exchange of ideas and understandings. These particular examples have been included in this paper with the permission of each student.

Erica – Becoming a teacher for me is a rollercoaster ride

For me, when I came to uni I am a very shy person and I found it really hard to meet people and to make friends. In the beginning I wasn't even sure that I really wanted to be a teacher and even up to this semester I didn't think I would stick at it. But this semester has changed my whole life. Working the way that we have in the connected curriculum and having the weekly ECE CoP is just what I think I needed to be able to start to see myself actually being a teacher. Going to CAFU (Child and Family Unit) on campus really made a big difference for me: I got to see all that I was learning about actually happening right there. I also got opportunities to have a go at things knowing that I wasn't being judged and where I felt that it was okay if I made a mistake. I got to be really comfortable with other students in the room too and I got to see that we are all different, but that we can help each other and learn from each other as we go. Karen and Leisa and Angelene (academic staff) especially have helped me to come to see that the ups and the downs on the rollercoast are all good and each time I am down I will be strong enough to climb back up to the next peak and that each time I might get there faster and it will get easier. My family have talked to me about transferring to a uni closer to home, but I have said to them absolutely not – I am staying here because the support is great and I have learned so much from being a part of how it all happens now and I don't want to go back to the traditional way of doing all separate courses and not having the supports that I have now – we are like a family at the theme park and you always have more fun if you are with other people than if you are on your own. I feel like

every day when I come to uni or when I go to CAFU or I go to prac that I am smiling – I smile on the inside because, although I know the rollercoaster is scary, it is now a safe kind of scary and that I will always want to get back on and have another go.

Heather – A carousel on the back of a truck: now ready to move forward on the journey. The process of beginning to see yourself as a teacher is like the horse on the carousel, moving up and down and always revolving. I have come to realize that things that I believe in strongly influence the choices that I make, particularly in how I develop relationships with children, parents and other teachers. In the beginning, I felt as though I was on the carousel seat that didn't move – it just went around and around. But now I know that riding the horse is a lot more exciting. I understand that there are ups and downs, but I am not so afraid to have a go and to say and do what I think. Having close contact with the academic staff this semester has really helped, they have been the back of the truck – you need to have a really strong base to the truck to even think about moving a carousel. They have helped me to realize that I have a lot to offer to children and that, through all that I am learning I am able to connect everything and it all makes sense now. I have gained confidence in myself as a person and I feel that I have rights and responsibilities as well. Before, in all parts of my life, I have been bogged down by the choices that others have made and I hadn't realized that I could choose for myself. I have learned that all the horses on the carousel are never in the same position and that is okay – we are all going to be teachers, but each of us will look different and move at different times and that being different is a good thing, as long as you remain on the carousel and play the game. I also look forward to being on the back of the horse and seeing the other horses have got riders too and we have come to look out for each other.

Rebecca – Becoming a teacher is a journey through the jungle. Before I came to uni I didn't really have much idea about teaching or about how it would be for me other than what I had when I was a kid at school. At the beginning of uni I was lost in the big jungle. As you know when you are in a place like a jungle and you are trying to find your way, there are always obstacles to overcome. Some of them you can see and so you can take the time to plan the next part of your journey to get around them, but sometimes, the obstacles are like the wild animals in the jungle. They sneak up on you and you don't see them coming. When I started at uni I was stuck in the middle of the jungle without a map, but each time I seem to get another piece of the map and I now believe that when I finish university I will be out of the jungle and I should be ready to go and visit a new adventure, but this time, I will take a map with me, I will have had the experience of some of the obstacles so hopefully then it won't be so scary and I will get to that safe oasis much more quickly. I also know now that I am not the only one in the jungle or on an adventure and so I can work with others to find solutions. I have learned that the minute I start to feel uneasy in the jungle, or that I have no idea what to do next,

I should act straight away because there will always be someone in the CoP who can help me out and who will carry my pack or make me believe that I can overcome whatever challenge it is.

The excerpts from the work of these individual students make it apparent that they are more aware of the ways in which their thoughts and actions are influenced by their personal values and beliefs as well as how their involvement in the community of practice impacts upon their evolving professional identity. Although there were differences in the ways in which the individuals chose to express their ideas visually, importantly each of them identified the social impact of being a part of the journey and the importance of recognizing and accommodating their own individual needs in order to 'become a teacher'. The three examples above represent these students attempt to organize their emerging sense of professional identity. These metaphors illustrate the different ways in which these students are developing a sense of agency, both personally and professionally. They are developing new ways of knowing and seeing themselves (Kilderry, Nolan & Noble, 2003).

At the completion of the task, the students discussed the experience of sharing their metaphor with a small peer group and how the process had helped them to realize the value of such a process in their practice teaching contexts, where their metaphor could enable them to defend their beliefs and university-based knowledge in contexts where they were challenged. Therefore they saw their metaphor coupled with their ability to relate the elements contained within it as a defensive tool. Each of the students saw their involvement in this task as an initiation, as they recognized the value of re-visiting the construction of their personal metaphor over time, where they would continue to develop and refine their images as well as their understandings. They understood that the value in the metaphor for them as a group was that it gave them a common language to use to further develop their social networks and to engage with others in a process of critical reflection that would help them to conserve their knowledge, values and beliefs when faced with challenging situations.

Conclusions

It is through the development and promotion of secure communities of practice that professional development and capacity building can be further enhanced across the early childhood sector. The use of metaphor in this context is a powerful tool for social, emotional and cognitive development that is "vitally important to the critical reflection on pedagogy in which teachers ought to be engaged (Woods, Dias & Ellis, 1997, p.6). In fact, positive interactions that allows individuals, groups and communities to critically reflect and work together need to be common goals of teacher preparation programs,

regardless of their specific context. Skills for developing and maintaining such networks can be linked to the notion of critically reflective practice. Engagement with peers in a collegial manner is a vehicle by which these beginning pre service teachers can think otherwise about practice and become receptive to new epistemology. Indeed, the skills of social interaction that are valued in young children, such as being friendly towards others, helping, sharing, taking turns, working together, negotiating, co-operating, comforting, defending, showing concern and demonstrating empathy are examples of such skills that can be useful to the ways in which teachers are able to support one another. Therefore, the formation of meaningful social and professional networks requires careful examination at both the macro and the micro level to promote and enhance critically reflective practice in addition to social and peer support across early childhood contexts and demographics.

References

Bourdieu P. 1984 Questions de sociologie, Paris : Les Editions de Minuit.

Stengle, B.S. (1997). Transitive/Intransitive: The knowledge of reflective practice. *Teaching Education*, 8(2), 29-37.

Sumsion, J. 1997. *Promoting student teachers' reflection: A realistic goal?* Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Brisbane.

Wong, E.D. 1993. Understanding the generative capacity of analogies as a tool for explanation. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 30:1259-1272.

Woods, C. Dias, P. and Ellis, V. 1997. *The English Classroom as an Atelier: A place for promoting personal, passionate and critical cognition*. Based on a paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the International Federation for the Teaching of English, New York, NY, July 10-14.

Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2005

Tobin, K. (1990). Changing metaphors and beliefs: A master switch for teaching. *Theory into Practice*, 29(2), 122-127.

Omstein, 1999

Ben-Peretz, M. (2001) 'The impossible role of teacher educators in a changing world', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52, 263

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[Connelly and Clandinin, 1990](#) F.M. Connelly and D.J. Clandinin, Stories of experience and narrative inquiry, *Educational Researcher* **19** (1990) (5), pp. 2–14.

[Conway, 2001](#) P.F. Conway, Anticipatory reflection while learning to teach: From a temporally truncated to a temporally distributed model of reflection in teacher education, *Teaching and Teacher Education* **17** (2001),

[Dewey, 1933](#) J. Dewey, How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process, D.C. Heath, Boston (1933).

Eisner, 1979; Moon, 2004;

Wagner, C. L., Brock, D. R., & Agnew, A. T. (1994). Developing literacy portfolios in teacher education courses. *Journal of Reading*, 37, 668-674.

Lave, J & Wenger, E. (1992). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beauchamp, C. (2006). Understanding reflection in teaching: A framework for analyzing
the literature. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, McGill University.

(Clandinin & Connolly, 1996;
Clandinin & Connolly, 1995;
Schon, 1987;
Zeichner & Lidston, 1996)
Foucault, 1980
Flores & Day (2005
Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001;
Jenks, 1996a, 1996b;
Lyotard, 1984;
Prout, 2003a, 2003b
Ryan's (1986)
Noble, Goddard & O'Brien, 2003)
Berliner, 1988;
Dempster, Sim, Beere & Logan, 2000;
Elkerton, 1984;
Fimian & Blanton, 1987;
Fuller, 1969;
Ryan, 1986;
Williams, 1995
Hebert & Worthy, 2001
Brock & Grady, 1996
Noble, 2006).
Moss & Petrie, 2002
Fleer, 2000;
Goodfellow, 1995;
MacNaughton & Williams, 1998;
Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2006;
Sumsion, 2003)