# Working Towards Meaningful Reflection in Teacher Education as Professional Learning

Susan E. Elliott-Johns, Nipissing University

**ABSTRACT**

The terms "reflection" and "reflective practice" occur frequently in educational research and practice, particularly in numerous course descriptions for pre-service teacher education. However, the author remains unconvinced we, as teacher educators, are always accomplishing what we think and/or say we are in the name of "reflection." This article seeks to promote further dialogue around the role of reflection in teacher education via explorations of what more can be learned, while underscoring the need to clarify understandings in this complex area. The author draws on her own experiences as a reflective practitioner and advocate for the promotion of *meaningful* reflection as professional learning.

## Introduction

My current research and practice seeks to promote understanding around what more can be learned about the role of meaningful reflection in contemporary teacher education. Along with Ottesen (2007), I contend there is, "a huge potential for expanding reflection in teacher education" (p. 43) but, in order to effectively do so, I would suggest it might be helpful to first clarify our understandings around a) *what* we are asking teacher candidates to do (in the name of "reflection") as well as b) *why* we are asking them to reflect. For example, as Loughran (2002) wrote, more than a decade ago, "Reflection has developed a variety of meanings as the bandwagon has traveled through the world of practice" (p. 33). Russell (2013) also summarizes similar concerns to my own:

> Once teacher educators took up the terms *reflection* and *reflective practice*…. many of us began to ask teacher candidates to reflect. Many of us seemed to assume that the meaning of *reflect* is self-evident. I hear many complaints from students that they are weary of so much reflection, particularly when so many different assignments call for reflection and when they have been given little guidance in terms of what reflection involves, what the results of reflection should look like, and how reflection can help them learn to teach. Personally, I have grown weary of hearing that teacher candidates have been asked to "write a one-page reflective paper" on a particular topic. I am particularly concerned about the lack of guidance and about the tendency to separate reflection (whatever it may be) from the context of personal action. (p. 81)

In my work as teacher educator, encouraging teacher candidates to move towards becoming reflective practitioners, that is, individuals who are enabled to connect reflection to personal action, remains a priority. At surface level, and to enact this as pedagogy, I purposively design course components to include both classroom learning activities and assignments for evaluation that require in-depth discussion, critical thinking, and reflection. I find it increasingly beneficial to allocate class time to explanations of what I mean by reflection, my rationale for including opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect in the course, the explicit clarification of expectations for reflection as part of course components, and the sharing of illustrative examples. Recognizing this as, most likely, a direct result of continuing to interrogate, develop, and enact my pedagogy of teacher education (including documenting my own critical reflections), reflection continues, very naturally, to work along (and between) the margins of my research and practice.

## Context

While the concepts of reflection and reflective practice occur frequently in the research literature and discourse of teacher education—including the relevance of reflective practice to ongoing professional learning for teachers and administrators (Admiraal & Wubbels, 2005; Birmingham, 2004; Day, 2003; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Russell & Korthagen, 1995), the concept still appears to be somewhat vague—and often interpreted very differently. Schon's (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner is at the heart of several contemporary understandings. Otteson (2007) also notes,

> the seminal impact of John Dewey (1997; Original work published in 1910) and Max Van Manen (Van Manen, 1977, 1991) has strongly influenced the development of a variety of understandings and perspectives on reflection in education (see among others Calderhead, 1987; Zeichner, 1987; Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1991; Russell & Munby, 1992; Valli, 1992; Korthagen, 2001). (pp. 31–32)

My own understandings are informed by the pragmatic influences in the work of both Dewey and Schon. For example, an idea circulated in Dewey's "The School and Society" (1956) is one that still resonates for me today as a teacher educator, both personally and professionally:

> mind cannot be regarded as an individualistic monopolistic possession, but represents the outworkings of endeavour and thought of humanity; that is developed in an environment which is social as well as physical, and that social needs and aims have been most potent in shaping it. (p. 99)

Initially educated as a teacher in London, England (1975-1979), Dewey's philosophy of education and pivotal ideas still provide rich sources of inspiration in my own reflective practice. Dewey's writings on the nature of experience remain a conceptual and imaginative backdrop (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that also informs my work in the area of teaching others about reflection in education, specifically reflection in and for *teacher* education. Dewey regarded education, experience, and life as inextricably intertwined and that to study education is to study experience. Thus the study of education is seen as a reciprocal process; that is, we not only learn about education by thinking about life, but also about life from thinking about education. Furthermore, Schon (1983) described the development of reflective practice as involving critical examination of one's experience in order to derive new levels of understanding by which to guide future action.

If a central purpose of teacher education is to successfully prepare teacher candidates to be legitimate participants of the teaching profession, I believe we have an inherent responsibility to advocate for the importance of meaningful reflection and the cultivation of habitual reflections that, over time, contribute to effective reflective practice as professional learning. Therefore, I continue to place considerable emphasis on developing explicit awareness of the important "shift" from *thinking like a student* to *thinking like a teacher*, as facilitated by the ability to reflect deeply on experience as one discovers, "that explicating and exploring dilemmas is of itself a way of knowing" (Swartz, 1994, p. 101).

## Looking for Answers in Reflections on Practice

How do I describe what I understand by reflection to teacher candidates? First and foremost, I demonstrate how (and why) reflective practice is firmly situated as a central feature in my own life and work; I talk openly about how nurturing the development of teachers who *think deeply* about their professional practice is at the heart of my efforts to promote reflection in teacher education, underscoring the emphasis on *meaningful* reflection. Approaches to facilitating the development of meaningful reflection are highly diverse and complex and, again like Russell (2013), I sometimes worry that "the ways teacher educators have responded to and made use of the concepts of reflection and reflective practice may be doing more harm than good in pre-service teacher education" (p. 80).

I consciously embed *learning to reflect* throughout my work with teacher candidates. For example, explicitly teaching about reflection as a "skill" (one that needs to be practiced regularly), and directly linking this to understandings of personal action and professional learning. Whenever possible, I explain and systematically *model* reflective practice. All this is done quite deliberately in order to diminish the effects of what, in my experience, is too often the case: "Teacher candidates tend to complete a program with a muddled and negative view of what reflection is and how it might contribute to their professional learning" (p. 87).

Facilitating the teaching of thinking is at the heart of this work because, as Socrates suggests, "I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think…" Equally, this has relevance to promoting teacher candidates' thinking about "learning to teach," as well as the pragmatics associated with their beginning to identify and successfully integrate strategies for the teaching *of* thinking—an essential aspect of developing effective classroom practice.

Turning the lens on ourselves, as teacher educators, is a constructive starting point in gaining clarity and greater understanding about what we actually mean by 1) reflection (e.g., when including this in course content at the faculty); and 2) honing the ability to articulate why we think "reflection" is an important element of teacher education.

While it may seem somewhat daunting at first to do this (*alongside* students too), it is worth pushing through the initial angst if one is serious about teaching teachers to reflect beyond the superficial. In my own experience, surfacing and articulating responses to both 1) and 2) above and "drilling down" on these with our colleagues also illuminates what appears to have gone awry in terms of "reflective practice" in teacher education (Russell, 2013).

My own sense of identity as a teacher educator is also of relevance here. As someone who consistently turns to "journalling" (recording thoughts, ideas, questions, and responses to, "What have I learned?"), I can systematically examine and try to better understand my own assumptions, motivations, aspirations, commitments, and relationships related to life and work. The notion of making pedagogy visible and to better understand what is happening and/or what I might do differently remains integral to the purposes of my own reflection as an educator, and I find it a fairly natural process to model reflective practice in the classroom on an ongoing basis. Consequently, inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning include my ongoing professional learning and current research in the self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP). In essence, to paraphrase Mark Twain, "How do I know what I think until I write it down?" has become a significant guiding question for my own research and practice, and responses over time frequently offer multi-faceted and informative insights. In turn, reflections on various ways I act upon what I am learning (e.g., specifically about being a teacher of teachers and the different ways teacher candidates respond to my approaches to teaching and learning), continue to inform my pedagogy of teacher education. Rich sources of deeper understanding are made available as a result of my own critical thinking processes and reflection on the ongoing development and enactment of a pedagogy of teacher education (Loughran, 2006; Russell & Loughran, 2007). Understandings often resonate deeply and iteratively as catalysts for further thinking about innovative teaching, research, and pedagogy—especially when, I find, they are shared with my students of teaching.

So, what *do* we say when we look hard at what we do and why we do it? What do we write when we stay silent long enough to actually reflect upon and write at length about this exceedingly difficult career we have chosen for ourselves? The first (2007) of two sample journal entries illustrate reflections over time, and serves to share insights into some of my own thinking early on in my career as a full-time teacher educator at the faculty, and more specifically, the habitual work of interrogating and learning from analysis of practice:

> *… All courses I teach seek to effectively integrate effective practice grounded in a coherent theoretical framework relevant to contemporary teaching and learning of language arts and literacy. Highly collaborative, interactive, inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning are central to my planning for instruction, along with the provision of numerous examples of literacy resources relevant to J/I grade levels. My approach to teaching J/I language arts with teacher candidates strives to demonstrate how (and why) to work with language/literacy across the curriculum, prioritizes the development of critical*

*thinking, reflective practices, and encourages them to forge links between their own literacy lives and their experience as novices on the "teacher education continuum"….*

*…. I believe that the design of climates conducive to learning requires self-respect, a genuine respect for others, knowledge, understanding, sensitivity, effective communication skills, recognition of diversity, and the ability to nurture relationships between all participants in a classroom learning community. I work hard to engage all teacher candidates in classes that explicitly model and demonstrate how reflecting upon what they are learning about teaching can, in turn, serve to inform their "thinking like a teacher" and developing pedagogy for J/I classrooms....*

(Excerpt from Journal Entry, 2007)

A second, more recent journal entry (2012), resonates with similar themes and offers an even clearer articulation of developing pedagogy and practice to support teacher candidates in *both* learning to reflect and in making explicit the links to their professional learning:

*The central aims woven through all my courses of study (prepared for teaching pre-service teachers how to teach language arts and literacy) continue to highlight relevant topics that reflect the objective of preparing participants to teach diverse learners in contemporary J/I classrooms. Knowledge of, and experience with, effective teaching and learning to promote language arts and literacy across the curriculum in J/I grade levels are carefully integrated through assigned readings, class discussions, experiential class/group activities, the ongoing study of children's and young adult literature as resources, relevant assignments, and frequent opportunities for reflection and the construction of practical wisdom. I endeavour to ensure participants are offered opportunities to read, write, and critically think about their "learning about teaching," and to engage in the ongoing development of reflective practice….*

(Excerpt from Journal Entry, 2012)

## Explorations of Reflection in Contemporary Teacher Education

Reflection is frequently listed as an integral aspect of most teacher education programs, indeed, it seems just about every website cites the importance of becoming a "critically reflective teacher." However, students still appear to experience confusion about the *nature* of reflection once in the course/program. Again, what does it really *mean* to reflect? For example, I have observed the term "reflection" attached to assigned coursework that merely requires the annotation or recording of observations/

descriptions in note form (my problem with this being that "note-taking" is undertaken for different purposes and involves very different processes to [meaningful] reflection); I have also overheard comments from teacher candidates who are clearly frustrated at being asked to reflect one more time, do not really understand what they are being asked to do and why, and, in these instances, "reflection" has most definitely become "The 'R' word!". Comments shared by faculty and teacher candidates alike often demonstrate major differences in perceptions of expectations for reflection from one professor to another—and inevitable confusion. These observations have resulted in closer examination of my own expectations and further explorations of the question, *What do I intend teacher candidates to learn when I design and include opportunities to reflect in coursework?*

Some initial responses to this question surfaced tensions between my recognition of limited time available to teach reflection effectively, including attending to the essential elements of building trust and confidence with teacher candidates in my classes so that they may also become more comfortable in composing and sharing authentic reflections. At the same time, it became clear that it is not my intention to act as a therapist (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005), but rather, to link the reflective process to the completion of teacher education coursework as professional learning. I would argue there is a pressing need to prioritize opportunities for teacher candidates to think critically, and to experience reflection much more deeply than is possible when reflection is interpreted as, "jotting a note on what I observed." Therefore, I began to closely examine the results of assignments I currently ask teacher candidates to complete as coursework, and to analyze the work submitted in the light of two questions: 1) *What do my teacher candidates appear to be learning?* and 2) *What am I learning (as a teacher educator) about what they are learning?*

The discussion that follows presents some recurring themes identified in assigned coursework related to teacher candidates' reflections on assigned readings, and in samples of reflective writing completed as a written rationale for selecting a piece of literature and preparing an accompanying multimodal response. Increasingly, as a teacher educator, I learn so much about these developing teachers and their "thinking like a teacher" as a result of engaging with samples of reflective writing. For me, this also makes such assignments more valuable in terms of what we are *collectively* able to glean from the completion of coursework, and how their learning about teaching continues to inform and enhance my own practice in terms of the "pedagogical turn" (Russell, 1997).

## Learning Through Experience: Reflection in the Teacher Education Classroom

As an instructor of learning and teaching language arts, I endeavour to explicitly address the two competing agendas students of teaching must recognize and to which they must respond (Loughran, 2006). In brief, these are *teaching about teaching* and *learning about teaching*: that is, student teachers need not only to focus on learning what is being taught, but also the ways in which that teaching is conducted. Loughran draws attention to the crucial work of teaching *about* teaching and the explicit unpacking of pedagogical expertise that allows for practice to move beyond the technical-rational (i.e., a focus on "tips and tricks" that can still be found inhabiting outdated conceptualizations of what constitutes teacher education today), to teaching about teaching in ways that model appropriate attitudes, knowledge, and skills of teaching itself.

In my work in the classroom and as a self-study researcher, I am very open to learning alongside my students and thus also the re-shaping of my own teacher education practices. I have found that combining Loughran's influential work with a reflective teaching model grounded in John Dewey's fundamental equation of **Experience** + **Reflection** = **Growth** both motivates and enables teacher candidates in my Language Arts classes to progress in the area of reflection, and this also moves them along what I like to refer to as the "teacher education continuum."

Reflective thinking, from Dewey's perspective, requires a teacher to turn a subject over in the mind and give it serious and consecutive consideration. Frankly, when they first arrive in the B.Ed program, teacher candidates who know how to truly reflect, or understand how it can enhance their learning about teaching, are rare. This is an important assumption to examine (e.g., it appears to be an assumption held by many when reflection features so prominently in numerous course descriptions and assignments). The ability factor is likely to be closely tied to trust and rapport established between teacher and students in this regard (that will also, by association, contribute a great deal to the "confidence" factor). This becomes crucial as I not only ask them to work on developing their reflective thinking and writing, but also (sometimes) ask for their reflective writing to be submitted and evaluated.

Building authentic trust and rapport takes time, and a question I frequently find myself asking is, "What do we teach when there isn't time to teach everything?" Undoubtedly, time is perpetually of the essence. I intentionally allocate time to ensure teacher candidates are afforded opportunities to engage in meaningful reflection and writing, as well as integrating reflective practice across all of our class activities

and assignments. Figure 1 presents a guiding framework introduced and discussed in class very early in the year, and to which we continually refer. Teacher candidates are encouraged to think of the process as "looking through the rear-view mirror"—thereby facilitating their reflection on (and in) action/experience. The goal is to stimulate critical thinking and to provide ongoing support for reflection—rather than "re-telling" (often, at first, the default mode). However, as meaningful, guided reflection becomes more familiar practice, and ongoing constructive feedback (oral and written) is offered to "nudge" thinking about learning about teaching further, teacher candidates' demonstrated skill, confidence, awareness of a critical stance, and understandings of meaningful reflection as professional learning begin to surface in reflections.

***A GUIDING FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTIVE WRITING***

CONSIDER IT LIKE "LOOKING THROUGH THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR...."
crafting a synthesis of your thinking in response to the assigned reading,
your knowledge, experience, ongoing professional development...

WHAT COMES TO MIND?
your understanding of the text? (content);
related experiences? prior knowledge? new knowledge? questions?

ASSESSING YOUR REFLECTIONS....ARE THEY:
thought-provoking? in-depth? constructing
personal meaning? making critical connections? raising further questions?

ARE YOU THINKING AND WRITING FROM AN "I" PERSPECTIVE?
reflect from the 1st person perspective of a
practicing teacher as you continue to learn about teaching and learning...

ARE YOU EXPLORING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED...
What have I learned?
What does this mean to me?
How might this influence my developing practice? Ideas? Examples?

ARE YOU UTILIZING DIFFERENT 'TYPES OF THINKING' (AS BLOOM):
Knowledge…
Comprehennsion…
Application…
Analysis…
Synthesis…
Evaluation…

Fig. 1: A guiding framework for reflective thinking

Teacher candidates are asked to "dig down deep" and express personal/professional opinions, wonderings, ideas, questions, connections, and so forth in their reflections, and a great deal of work has to be invested early on to build as much trust and rapport as possible, as quickly as possible. I cannot overemphasize the need for building supportive relationships and a classroom climate conducive to risk-taking and collegial support as a context for this work.

I have noticed some recurring patterns and themes in teacher candidates' reflections, particularly at the beginning of the B.Ed year, and I use these to inform and improve my practice in this area. For example, initial reflections are frequently written in the third person, as opposed to the first person, "I…." and constitute observations, or "re-telling," as well as arms-length "commentary" (also in the third person) such as, "Teachers should…." We confer in class about how difficult it is for them to switch into first person (e.g., they will comment that "undergraduate degree assignments were *always* required in third person," and they find it very odd now to be writing an assignment in first person); inevitably, this further informs my approaches to responsive instruction (see also Figure 1). In written feedback my comments ("nudges") will ask, "Are you thinking and writing from an "I" perspective?" and offer suggestions to assist cultivation of a more reflective stance.

At first, that the purpose of the writing itself is to demonstrate *their* thinking and professional learning sometimes appears difficult to grasp (e.g., in terms of the prompt, "What comes to mind?"). For example, many teacher candidates begin exhibiting very little confidence in sharing their own "voice"; rather, they will cite/quote/paraphrase the "experts." Recognizing, and *using* student voices to guide instruction (Elliott-Johns, Booth, Rowsell, Puig, & Paterson, 2012), represents another cornerstone of my research and practice—and another reason why I consider opportunities for *meaningful* reflections such a vital aspect of teacher education. The gradual surfacing of their own "voice," and increasingly critical thinking conveyed in the reflections I read and respond to throughout the year, requires consistent support, encouragement, and *time* to *think*.

In my experience, it is extremely important to be sensitive to the fact that, depending on their life experience, these young adults who aspire to be teachers may not perceive themselves as "writers"; it is very often helpful to present ideas on learning about being a writer, as appropriate, as well as relevant practical knowledge about preparing to be a teacher of writing.

Russell (2013) reminds us, "Whatever reflection and reflective practice are, they are not ends in themselves; hopefully they are means to the end of better teaching

practices and better learning by students in schools" (p. 80). I would add, the rich contributions to professional growth both my students and I are able to experience together, including their valuable insights that influence shaping and re-shaping of the course design and approaches to instruction, are only possible if we understand Russell's point—and make the necessary *time* and *guidance* available for meaningful reflection if it is to augment teacher education. As teacher educators, individually and collectively, I strongly suggest we need to be looking at our own practice and asking the critical question: *Is the way I am making use of the concepts of reflection and reflective practice doing more harm than good?*

## Exploring Reflection/Reflective Practice as Professional Learning

An assignment teacher candidates are asked to complete in the second semester of my J/I Language Arts class is a multi-modal response to literature (Elliott-Johns, 2011). This assignment calls for, and supports, multiple layers of reflection, as well as the effective integration of technology enhanced learning (TEL). It also illustrates what I strive to have teacher candidates learn later in the year as they continue developing their reflective thinking and writing as an integral part of being a teacher (and "reflective practitioner"). This assignment has become a highly popular vehicle that motivates teacher candidates' abilities to truly reflect and to "dig a little deeper"—an evocative and commonly used phrase in my classes (and one I know gets picked up and used during practicum with their students too!) A brief overview for the multi-modal assignment for teacher candidates follows:

> As a J/I teacher, you will need to build an extensive repertoire of literacy teaching and learning strategies for use in your classroom across the curriculum. Literature response strategies enable teachers to assess a student's demonstration of their learning and understanding of the texts they read, and also lend themselves to consideration of "new" literacies. This assignment is an opportunity to explore multi-modal ways for your students to respond to a self-selected literature selection. ***This assignment is to be completed individually—there will be no exceptions to this requirement.*

The assignment aims to link to ongoing development of professional learning for classroom practice, as well as promote and support reflection/reflective practice. By modifying the framework of the Task outlined below, many teacher candidates elect to develop similar assignments during final practicum for their own students in Grades 4–10. Many report sharing the assignments they had completed themselves in our course (and/or copies of assignments they received permission to use from their class

colleagues) as samples/examples when introducing and discussing this kind of work with their own students and Associate Teachers:

> **YOUR TASK:**
> (1) **Identify a literature selection of your own choice**, one suitable for use in either a Junior and/or Intermediate curriculum area. Using your MAC, prepare a computer generated *multimodal response* to your literature selection. For example, your selection might be a picture book, a novel, a poem, or a non-fiction selection: The selection identified will provide the focus for your development of a multimodal literature response. Using multimedia of your own choice, plan and present a response that represents your understandings and the connections made to the "big ideas"/themes/interpretations that resonate for you in the text selected. Your multimodal response may involve text, images, movement, music, and/or other modes you find relevant to effectively communicating your response.

The multimodal responses have provided rich examples of reflection utilizing a diverse range of multimedia in order to creatively do so. For example, interpretations of, and responses to, the text selected as conveyed through a presentation of images, music, drama, text, and/or other media. In turn, this suggests non-traditional approaches to readers' responses that can be promoted in contemporary classrooms—underscored by Loughran's notion of shaping learning about teaching differently, and readers interested in this particular aspect of work might also find an earlier article (Elliott-Johns, 2011) informative. It is only fair to say that, since 2011, the multimodal responses have become increasingly sophisticated and more complex.

To illustrate my own work-in-process, towards facilitating more meaningful reflection, I will focus on the nature of reflective writing teacher candidates are encouraged to share in response to the second component of this assignment, as follows:

> (2) **Construct a written rationale** that demonstrates your understanding of the uses of quality literature for instruction and learning in J/I classrooms. (e.g., *Why* this selection? What does it mean to *you*?) Your rationale should reflect a broad definition of literacy, as shared in class. You may also wish to use examples from your identified selection to support points you make. Your written rationale should be no more than four pages in length and double-spaced.

Many submissions for this component of the assignment offer, enhance, and expand upon answers to the question, *What do I intend teacher candidates to learn when I design and include opportunities to "reflect" in coursework?* For example, the five excerpts

included here (all representative samples of work completed by teacher candidates), offer evidence of further understandings of the complex nature of learning to "think like a teacher" and, in this way, they also inform and enhance my development of a pedagogy of teacher education.

The reflections explore (personal) responses to the literature selected, as well as interrogate why (and how) the author might consider using as a resource in the classroom; inferences, questions, connections made (e.g., text to world), as well as recognition of the changing definitions of "literacy" and multimodal approaches to "ways of knowing," all convey insights into developing awareness of the potential breadth and depth of meaningful reflection on professional learning as beginning teachers:

*#1. I would love to share this text (Jonathan Livingston Seagull) with my J/I students as a "story to learn from" and also find ways to explore with them how they might relate to JL's life…. (e.g., through reflecting on their own experiences). Middle school years represent Erikson's fifth stage of development—identity vs. role confusion. There is peer pressure to be alike or part of "the flock," but each of us has to discover our own strengths and choose our own path. I'd really like my students to understand it is okay to pursue their dreams and be their own version of Jonathan…*

*#2. I chose Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," a poem that reflects themes of overcoming adversity. In my experience on placement I noticed poetry wasn't receiving it's fair share of attention or perhaps the best selections were not being made… at this point in time, I see poetry as at risk of falling even further out of favour with youth because, after all, it is only words… but, as our work for this assignment has clearly demonstrated, creating a meaningful montage with words, images, music, and video is an important tool we new teachers will have to "hook" our students in. I thought this was a very good poem to look more closely at because the lines in the poem are not explicit—one really has to think about what they say… This gives me a "way in" to work with my students…*

Rich imagery, the sharing of personal life experiences, further explorations of learning about teaching, contemporary socio-cultural factors, related issues, and evidence of increasing ability to "think like a teacher" are woven into the fabric of thoughtful, and thought-provoking, reflections:

*#3. This book ("The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian") will be in any class I work in and I will certainly recommend it to anybody interested in learning more about poverty and Indigenous people in Canada. I find it captures images of many of the communities I have travelled to or lived in over the years and is shockingly realistic. Through Arnold's*

*narrative, Sherman Alexie is able to help people understand some of the reasons for the desperate state of being in some First Nation communities… It is brutally honest and raw so it couldn't be recommended for all (students) but it is quality literature—cutting, exciting, well written, and timely… M. (Moosonee) has been on my mind a lot recently. It may be that it is application time and somewhere deep down I am contemplating going back (to the North). It may also be good memories, or the news reports about A. (Attawapiskat) but, quite honestly, I feel like packing my bags right now….*

*#4. As I was putting my multimodal response together and thinking about this whole assignment, I reflected on how I could most accurately and effectively convey my emotions and responses to Jared Paul's poem, "ABCs for Roger." It took a few tries! I initially began representing the poem as if it was a response from Jared himself and including images I think he was intending to portray…. However, in the end, I felt no connection to this response. I finally realized I needed to re-work my response to represent what I visualize when I listen to him recite this poem. For me, the lyrics of Xavier Rudd's "Sky to the Ground" (one that I consistently listened to during my bus rides to camp in Jamaica) create a vivid image of different places around the world and illustrate a more positive view of the world than the words of Jared Paul… Both pieces send me on journeys across the world and I'm able to reflect deeply on things I have seen and things I still hope to see… as well as what these experiences mean to me as the teacher I'm becoming….*

Reflections shared in each of these excerpts are indicative of perseverance with professional learning *as* reflection—something I contend offers the ability to be more effective decision makers in the development of classroom practice. Furthermore, the nature of questions posed call for further examination of complex issues and necessitate tolerance for ambiguity when there are no easy answers to issues raised in reflections on resources selected for classroom use:

*#5. I'm learning that current interpretations of critical literacy teach students that text is not necessarily literal and they need to dig deeper to construct views embedded in words and images, thus promoting a society that is more empathetic and proactive in preventing social injustice… "Three Wishes" by Deborah Ellis presents the life stories of Israeli and Palestinian children in their own voices… and one can easily discern the commonalities: effects of war and terror, hope for better futures, firm beliefs in their god… Having discovered this book was banned from a few Ontario school boards, it makes me wonder what are our priorities as adults in society? Do we truly wish to help all children and ensure their rights are not violated? What are we doing, not just as teachers but as members of society, to ensure First Nations and Aboriginal children are not only receiving an education that is useful to them, but also making sure they have*

> *food, water, shelter, and heat in the winter? Unfortunately (or fortunately?) this book has left me with more questions than answers…*

As Dallas, Reed, and Graves (2010) suggest, I believe teachers become more effective decision makers when they are reflective about decisions, instead of relying solely on technical, linear, prescribed formulas. The ability to select resources for students with confidence, to plan lessons and units appropriately, while also making adjustments to meet the needs of *all* students, require teachers to make informed decisions that require reflective thinking:

> Much like when we look in the mirror to check and see how we look before we start each day, reflection serves teachers as a means to check their daily routines and determine if what they are doing best serves the students in the classroom. (p. 69)

However, becoming a reflective practitioner does not occur by osmosis, or simply because I include reflection as a component in my course of study. First and foremost, one has to work with something substantive enough (e.g., a text, an event, a dilemma), something one cares enough *about*, to reflect on it. The professional learning experienced by teacher candidates in the excerpts included here also came about as a result of clear expectations, opportunities to engage in more meaningful reflection, and guidance and support throughout the process. The assigned work does not call for "booklists," "summaries," or "sample lesson plans"—rather that they work to intrinsically experience the self-selected text as a teacher, for example, relating to the text and learning to exercise sound professional judgment in terms of its potential use in the classroom—while continuing to think about the how and the why of building reflection into their professional practice.

## Promoting Meaningful Reflection in Teacher Education: A Call for Further Research Examining Practice

As previously mentioned, concepts of reflection and reflective practice are characteristics of many courses in contemporary teacher education. It would appear teacher educators value opportunities to reflect and become reflective practitioners, and thus embed these throughout courses of study. However, I remain unconvinced we are actually accomplishing what we think and/or say we are accomplishing in the name of "reflection," and propose we need to continue exploring related research and practice in this area. For example, as teacher educators, how *do* we actually present opportunities to reflect across the myriad of courses in which this verb appears? And do our teacher candidates truly understand a) the purposes of including "reflection" and

b) critical distinctions between *thinking* and *reflection*? Again, to quote Ottesen (2007), who references Stein's comment, (Stein being a student teacher from one of her classes) as follows: "Reflecting, reflecting, reflecting. I think all the time, don't I? I mean, it's not like I don't think. What is it with this reflection thing that makes it so important?" (p. 32).

Stein's question, "*What is this reflecting thing?*" sounds very familiar (and furthermore, why *is* it so important?). A number of researchers have posed and pursued similar questions (Birmingham, 2004; Calderhead, 1987; Korthagen, 2001; Loughran, 2002; Russell, 2013; Zeichner, 1994). Rodgers (2002) also points out that a number of problems emerge in the practice and research on teacher education as a direct result of confusion around the meaning of reflection: What kinds of thoughts qualify as reflection? How can reflection be assessed? How can it be talked about? How can it be researched to determine what effects it has on teacher candidates' learning about teaching?

Further research is needed that investigates the perspectives of teacher educators—specifically in terms of the rationale (for) and effects (of) reflection in teacher education. For example, in-depth exploration of the work of teacher educators (including my own) who *say* they include reflection as an essential characteristic of their teacher education program.

Six guiding questions are recommended, questions which might also be of interest to other teacher educators interested in exploring concepts of reflection and reflective practice in contemporary teacher education and professional learning:

- What do we (as teacher educators) *mean* by reflection? (or, "*What is this reflecting thing?*")
- As teacher educators, how do we describe what we understand by reflection and reflective practice?
- What do we intend teacher candidates to learn when we design and include opportunities to reflect in a) coursework? and b) field experience?
- How do we *teach* reflection? What challenges and opportunities are encountered in this area of our own practice?
- How do teacher candidates describe their understandings of reflection, and relationships between action/reflection in "learning about teaching"?
- What can still be learned about reflection in contemporary teacher education?

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**Susan E. Elliott-Johns** is an Associate Professor and member of Graduate Faculty at Nipissing University in the Schulich School of Education, where she teaches courses and supervises graduate work. Research interests include teacher education, reflection and reflective inquiry, and educational leadership for contemporary contexts. Prior to joining the faculty at Nipissing, Susan enjoyed a very successful career in public education as a teacher (JK-8), literacy consultant, elementary school administrator, and teacher educator. An active member of ICSEI, AERA, and CATE, she frequently provides leadership through workshops, conference presentations, keynotes, and publications for teachers, administrators, and teacher educators across Canada, Europe, the United States, and Australia.

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