From: Reflective Practice in Action: 80 Reflection Breaks for Busy Teachers by Thomas S. C. Farrell, Corwin Press, c 2004.

Chapter Two

Why Reflect?

Why should teachers bother to reflect on their work? Many teachers are already overburdened with so many demands on their time outside of the classroom that they really have no room to entertain the idea of reflecting on their teaching. In many countries today there seem to be growing demands on teachers (e.g., the various recent mandates imposed at local and state levels in the United States) to standardize education programs so that students will be able to pass standardized tests. Often, these educational reforms have been authorized (some would say imposed) without input from the teachers who must implement them. Consequently, some teachers have experienced feelings of alienation and isolation because they have been asked to implement changes they have had no part in shaping. Teachers may see themselves as mere technicians executing programs that have been prepackaged and prescribed by others (Nieto, Gordon, & Yearwood, 2002). It is understandable that many teachers feel a sense of helplessness about their situations and roles in an education system perceived to be impersonal.

Though the future of the educational system may seem dire, teachers really can influence their practices much more that they think. As "transformative intellectuals" (Nieto et al., 2002, p. 345) who attempt to reflect on and influence their work, teachers can proactively start to take control of their working lives. As such, they become more empowered decision makers, engaging in systematic reflections of their work by thinking, writing, and talking about their teaching; observing the acts of their own and others' teaching; and by gauging the impact of their teaching on their students' learning.

In these ways, teachers can begin to locate themselves within their profession and start to take more responsibility for shaping their practice. This I call *reflective teaching* (note that I use the terms *reflection, reflective practice, reflective inquiry,* and *reflective teaching* interchangeably).

Reflection Break 2
Feelings About Teaching

- Do you ever feel helpless about your teaching situation and your role as a teacher? If so, why?
- Do you see yourself as a teacher working in an impersonal education system? If so, how do you deal with the system?
- Do you know anyone considering leaving the teaching profession and their reasons for this?
- Do you personally know any teachers who have quit the profession? If so, why did they say they were leaving teaching?
- Do you know how you can take more control of your teaching situation?
- Do you that think reflecting on your teaching (both inside and outside the classroom) can help you take more control of your teaching life? If so, how?
- What advice would you give to new teachers on how to keep themselves fresh throughout their teaching life?

Reflective Teaching

Take a few moments to answer the questions posed in Reflection Break 3 before reading on.

Reflection Break 3
Are You a Reflective Teacher?

- Are you a reflective teacher? How do you define the role?
- If you consider yourself to be a reflective teacher, how do you reflect?

- Can you outline any recent examples of your reflections on your teaching?
- Which topics are important for you to reflect upon?
- If you do not consider yourself a reflective teacher at this moment in time, what future plans do you have (if any) to become a more reflective teacher?
- Do you think that reflecting on your teaching is worth doing? Why or why not?
- What benefits do you think you might gain as a result of reflecting on your work?
- What would be the most difficult challenge to reflecting on your work?

Are you a reflective teacher? Reflective teaching requires that teachers examine their values and beliefs about teaching and learning so that they can take more responsibility for their actions in the classroom (Korthagen, 1993). This practice frees teachers from impulsive and routine activity and enables them to act in a more deliberate and intentional manner (Dewey, 1933/1958). Experience itself is actually not the "greatest teacher," for we do not learn as much from experience as we learn from reflecting on that experience.

There is no question that when teachers combine experience with reflection, professional growth is certain (Dewey, 1933/1958), resulting in more effective teaching. Continuing in the spirit of Dewey, Valli (1997) has observed that reflective teachers "can look back on events, make judgments about them, and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge" (p. 70). Teachers who do not bother to reflect on their work can become slaves to routine and powerless to influence their future careers.

It is much easier for teachers to complain about how bad educational systems are (and many teachers believe that this kind of venting is an act of reflective practice—it is not) than to reflect on their own behaviors, both inside and outside of the classroom. Reflective teachers make a point of becoming aware of the factors that affect their practice so they can improve their teaching and, thereby, positively influence the educational systems in which they work.

Why Is Reflective Teaching Worth Doing?

Some teachers may wonder why they should invest time and effort into reflective practice, time they do not have to spare. Even worse, they may view reflective practice as another "job" they have to complete. If teachers do not take time to reflect on their work, they may become prone to burnout. Classrooms are busy places (Jackson, 1968) with many things happening at each moment of each class. Jackson reminds us that an elementary teacher "engages in as many as 1,000 interpersonal interchanges each day" (p. 11). If a lesson is a dynamic event during which many things occur simultaneously, how can teachers hope to be aware of, and be able to control, everything that happens in their classrooms? A teacher's inability to recognize and attend to all classroom issues can, as Good and Brophy (1991) suggest, result in "self-defeating behavior" (p. 1).

Along with the dynamics of each lesson and the demands on time to prepare for classes, institutional constraints further limit teachers' hours in the day to reflect on their work because there is continued pressure to get through the curriculum. This all contributes to a stressful existence for teachers. It is no wonder that some teachers feel isolated and frustrated and entertain thoughts of leaving the profession. They are primed and ready for burnout. Motivated teachers, however, strive to create opportunities to reflect on their work. It all depends on how much time teachers are willing to invest in their own professional development.

If teachers can become more aware of what happens in their classrooms and can monitor accurately both their own behavior and that of their students, they can function more effectively. This can be achieved by engaging in personal reflection as well as reflective conversation with others. As Jay and Johnson (2002) have noted,

> Reflection is a process, both individual and collaborative, involving experience and uncertainty. It is comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one's thoughts into dialogue with oneself and with others. (p. 75)

Reflection Break 4
Teacher Burnout

Burnout can occur when teachers feel tired, depressed, ignored, trapped, anxious, or even just bored (Alschuler, 1980).

- Have you ever experienced the feeling of being burned out from teaching? Describe how you felt.

  If yes, can you outline what you think caused the burnout?

  How did you overcome the feeling (assuming you have overcome it)?
- What advice would you give to help beginning teachers avoid burnout?

The Classroom, Students, Teachers, and Community

Teaching for any period of time raises a number of questions about the teaching activity itself, the location (classroom) and context in which the activity occurs, and the people involved in the activity. The primary players in education are the teacher and the students, with the parents and school administration performing secondary roles. It is the teachers who have chosen their role as a career, and they may or may not have made a conscious decision to pursue this career. Nevertheless, whether novices or veterans, there comes a time in their lives when they wake up and ask themselves why they are doing what they do (at least, I did!). Teachers may have wanted to ask themselves these questions for some time but either did not have the time to devote to honestly thinking about their lives or feared how they might answer.

Reflection Break 5, "Eleven Questions About You as a Teacher," is a good starting point for teachers who want to begin reflecting on their work. The questions challenge teachers to look within and interrogate their initial decision to choose teaching as a career.

Reflection Break 5
Eleven Questions About You as a Teacher

Answer as many of the following questions about the *what* and *why* of teaching as you can:

1. Why did you become a teacher?
2. Did you want to become a teacher?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Those that can, do; those that can't, teach."? Explain your answer.
4. Can you define what the word "teacher" means to you?
5. If a child asked you to explain your job, how would you describe it?
6. What do your family and friends think about you as a teacher? Do they ever say that you "talk like a teacher" or other such things that may identify you as a teacher?

   If yes, what are they, and what does this tell you about yourself as a teacher?
7. What do you think your students think about you as a teacher?
8. Draw your ideal classroom. What does this drawing tell you about yourself as a teacher?
9. Describe your ideal student?
10. What do you want to accomplish in the future as a teacher?
11. What do you want to be known for as a teacher when you retire (your legacy)?

Now consider these questions:

- Which questions were difficult and which were easy for you to answer? Why?
- What did you learn about yourself as a teacher as a result of answering these questions?
- Do you agree that these questions get to the heart of who you are as a teacher?
- Can you think of any other questions to ask yourself?

The questions posed in Reflection Break 5 are easy to ask, but they're certainly not easy to answer, especially at this stage of your reflections. Nevertheless, it is important to at least ask yourself each question as an important first step to discover who you are as a teacher. It may be a good idea for you to write down your responses to these questions now as this exercise can help activate your prior knowledge (schema) about teaching. Even if your answer to many of the questions is, "I don't know," write it down. It's always beneficial to know where you stand before you embark on a reflective journey. You may want to revisit your answers to these questions a few months after reading this book. When you do, see if you would change any of your answers.

How Do I Become a Reflective Practitioner?

There are many suggestions in the literature covering the methods teachers can adopt to become reflective teachers. In this book, the basic framework involves engagement in a cycle of reflective practice (Smyth, 1987) by asking and answering fundamental questions such as

- What do I do as a teacher? (a description of my practice)
- What does this mean to me? (a look at the theories behind my practice)
- How did I come to be this way? (a look at the influences on my practice)
- How might I do this differently? (a look at my future actions)

Again, these questions are easy to ask but difficult to answer. To answer them, teachers must seek knowledge about their practice that requires in-depth and structured reflections. Effective reflective practitioners go a step beyond simply acknowledging successes and failures in the classroom by striving to figure out why some topics or approaches worked and others did not. Teachers dedicated to understanding their practice and growing professionally should

- Reflect on their theories, values, and beliefs about teaching
- Define what learning means to them
- Examine how their students learn and what enhances this learning or inhibits it

- Examine their teaching and their classrooms by monitoring themselves while teaching and interacting with students, colleagues, supervisors, administrators, and parents
- Engage in conversations with other teachers (and supervisors and administrators) about theories, methods, and approaches to teaching and other influences on their practice
- Read what others have said about various aspects of teaching
- Examine the institution in which they teach as well as the educational policies that the institution advocates and upholds
- Examine the community in which they teach

Reflective practitioners celebrate their professional ups and downs, for both propel them toward professional growth. Reflection, as it is outlined and discussed in this book is, as Goodman (1991) says, "much more than taking a few minutes to think about how to keep pupils quiet and on task" (p. 60). Reflection, Goodman has implied, is a dynamic "way of being in the classroom" (p. 60). In other words, engaging in reflective practice is a lifelong endeavor and not a one-off workshop. For teachers to be considered reflective practitioners, they must possess certain qualities that are absent in teachers who follow routine.

Dewey (1933/1958) has suggested that teachers who want to be reflective practitioners must possess three characteristics (or attitudes). They must be

- Open-minded
- Responsible
- Wholehearted

To be open-minded is to be willing to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. To be responsible is to carefully consider the consequences our actions, especially as they impact our students personally, intellectually, and socially. To be wholehearted is to be so committed to an idea or project that we can overcome fears and uncertainties in an effort to make meaningful personal and professional change.

Reflection Break 6
Dewey's Three Characteristics of Reflection

Before you embark on your reflective journey, take a look at Dewey's three characteristics:

1. Open-mindedness (willingness to listen to more than one side)
2. Responsibility (careful consideration of the consequences of our actions)
3. Wholeheartedness (commitment to seek every opportunity to learn)

Now consider these questions:

- What levels of these characteristics do you possess as a teacher now (high, medium, or low)?
- Which of these characteristics do you need to develop more as you continue as a teacher?
- Can you think of other desirable characteristics a reflective practitioner should possess?

As you read and interact with this book, I suggest that you continuously revisit Dewey's three reflective dispositions and assess which characteristics you possess during each reflective activity. I hope you can remain *open-minded* as you read each Reflection Break, take *responsibility* for your own professional development, and even encourage your colleagues to embark on their own reflective journeys. I also hope that you *wholeheartedly* begin to take responsibility for your professional development by looking within before you look outside of yourself.

When you finish this section and the chapters of this book, you may also want to reevaluate the degree to which you possess each of these attributes. As you continue to reflect on your work, I predict you will become wholeheartedly more open-minded because you have taken the responsibility to improve your teaching.