EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDENT TEACHERS' REFLECTION ON
THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICE:
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

During the past fifteen years there has been increasing interest in the role of reflection in professional development, especially amongst teacher educators. Yet although many preservice programs now place considerable emphasis on encouraging and assisting student teachers to reflect on their practice, reflection remains a problematic notion. There is little consensus, for example, about what constitutes reflection, how it might be identified, and whether it can be promoted.

This thesis reports a longitudinal study conducted over four years which explored the above issues within the context of an early childhood teacher education program, in Sydney (NSW), Australia. The specific purpose of this study was to investigate changes in student teachers' reflection on their professional development and practice during their enrolment in the Guided Practice component of their preservice program.

A strength of this study is its focus on reflection as a multidimensional phenomenon involving far more than the processes of analytical thought typically addressed by most previous research in this area. Drawing on an eclectic range of literature, this thesis argues that emotion, imagination, intuition, and contemplation can also play an integral role. As such, it asserts that reflection can be seen, in effect, as a complex and holistic search for meaning.

Conceptualising reflection in this holistic manner raises numerous methodological challenges. These challenges and the methodological decisions made in response to them are outlined prior to developing profiles of the participants' reflection. These profiles indicated that there was little consistent change in the reflection of eight of the 18 participants. For four student teachers, on the other hand, there was some change, while for six, there was considerable change.

Several factors which appeared instrumental in hindering or promoting these student teachers' reflection are identified. These include commitment (or lack of) to teaching and to reflection; an epistemological perspective of received or constructed knowing; and the extent to which the learning environment was perceived as supportive. The study concludes with a discussion of some
of the implications for teacher educators and for those intending to undertake further research into reflection.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis reports the passage of a group of early childhood student teachers through the practicum component of their preservice program. It also reflects my journey as a beginning researcher - one begun with much reluctance and trepidation but concluded with a sense of excitement, passion and commitment to undertaking further research. That such an outcome, to me, had been previously unimaginable symbolises the significance of this journey.

Throughout the past five years, I have been sustained by the interest and support of many family members, friends, professional colleagues, fellow postgraduate students and early childhood student teachers. Several key people, however, have made a special contribution to making my journey so professionally and personally rewarding.

In particular, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of the student teachers who participated in the study. Without their ongoing interest, involvement, patience and trust, this thesis would not have been possible.

I am deeply grateful to Associate Professor David Smith. His encouragement, insight, ability to provide an always appropriate balance of constructive criticism, reassurance and challenge, and his confidence in my ability to succeed have been invaluable.

Thank you, also, to fellow travellers, especially Joy, Patrice and Helen for their companionship and friendship, their practical and emotional support, and to the students in the postgraduate research group for their willingness to share in the doubts, difficulties and dilemmas as well as the achievements and celebrations of doctoral study.

Alma’s insightful feedback on an earlier draft of this thesis, Catherine’s involvement as mentor in the beginning stages of the project and Dana’s word processing assistance have also been much appreciated.

Finally, I thank my partner John, a committed positivist, for his ongoing love and support, his interest and consideration, his unfailing sense of humour and for providing the island retreat in which much of the conceptualisation, transcribing and writing took place.
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