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### **Reflect-Select-Defend: A Model for Student Teacher Reflection**

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#### **Abstract**

*This study, using mixed methods, addresses the importance of robust self-reflection for final year student teachers completing a Career Entry Profile (CEP). Set against UK regional variations, it examines one innovative model which encourages student teachers to 'reflect' on their strengths and areas for development according to stated competences, to 'select' appropriate evidence to create a CEP portfolio, and to 'defend' their conclusions in discussion with university tutors and school head teachers. The findings highlight the value of the 'reflect'- 'select'- 'defend' model by generating much greater depth and quality of reflection, and recommends that such a model be adopted on a wider scale.*

**Keywords:** Reflection; Competence; Evidence; Strengths; Areas for Development

#### **Introduction**

School placements have long been viewed as an essential part of Initial Teacher Education (ITE); placements offer aspiring practitioners opportunities to develop practical classroom expertise. Indeed the notion of work-based learning is not unique to teacher education and forms an integral part of other higher level courses such as engineering, medicine and architecture (see Ladd, 2007; Stachowski and Mahan, 1998). At the end of their last period of school placement all final year teacher education students

in the UK are required, as an integral part of their work, to write up a Career Entry Profile (CEP). The purpose of the CEP is to allow the student teacher to reflect on their personal and professional competence, in relation to a number of defined competence statements. The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) has identified 27 teacher competences; organised into three broad areas, relating to: (i) Professional Values and Practice; (ii) Professional Knowledge and Understanding; and (iii) Professional Skills and Application. Each competence is delineated by phase across the key areas of teacher education: (i) initial teacher education; (ii) induction; (iii) early professional development; (iv) continuing professional development; and (v) collaborative practice and school improvement. Central to each of the competence statements is the Council's Code of Values and Professional Practice. Anecdotal evidence based on review of completed CEPs, over the years, in one institution providing Initial Teacher Education (ITE), would suggest that, in some cases, the reflections of the students are not as insightful as they could be. This perception is made all the more real when the content of the CEP is compared to the richness of the professional dialogue that normally takes place between tutors and students on School Based Work visits. This study critically examines the introduction of a unique project, by one ITE provider in Northern Ireland, which aims to challenge final year B.Ed. students to reflect more critically on their own personal and professional competence and thus take much greater responsibility for their own learning and future professional development.

#### **Professional Reflection Processes**

The use of reflection is widespread in different professions, typically social work, medicine, nursing and teaching (see Mamedeand Schmidt,2004; Loughran, 2002; Atkinsand Murphy,1993; Pollard, 2008). In order to set the present study in context, an overview of reflection and reflective practices is offered below followed by a focus on the application of reflective practices to teachers and more specifically to student teachers including a consideration of the potential challenges that reflection creates.

**Reflection and Reflective Processes**

Reflection is, or perhaps should be, at the centre of what professionals do. There is a proliferation of models of reflective practice in existence (Pollard, 2008) and yet all promote the same basic concept; that is, the importance of practitioners reflecting on past events with a view to improving future performance and outcome. Reflection is aimed at helping the practitioner to consider events that have occurred in the past and to then use that evidence to further enhance the learning situation in the future.

In its simplest form reflection is a 3-stage linear process, represented diagrammatically in Figure 1, which requires the practitioner to:

- Stage 1 - look at something that they have been involved with
- Stage 2 - seek to understand it
- Stage 3 – endeavour to learn from it. However, in order for such reflection to be successful it is important that the person involved, as Pollard (2008) suggests, is

‘impartial’, ‘accountable’ and ‘dedicated’. ‘Impartiality’ ensures that the reflective person does not favour one outcome more than any other. ‘Accountability’ ensures that they are responsible for their own actions; responsibility lies with that individual and no one else. ‘Dedication’ ensures that the individual is focused in their outlook that is on the determination of a more effective way of achieving a better outcome. In essence the reflective practitioner will look back over past events and seek to learn from them; ultimately they are attempting to address the key question “How could I do this better? or “What can I learn from the past to improve the future?”

Other models of reflection depict the process as a cyclical procedure, where an action is undertaken, reflected upon, reviewed, and a plan of action for improvement is outlined and then implemented (this is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2).



Figure 1: The Reflective process – the linear model

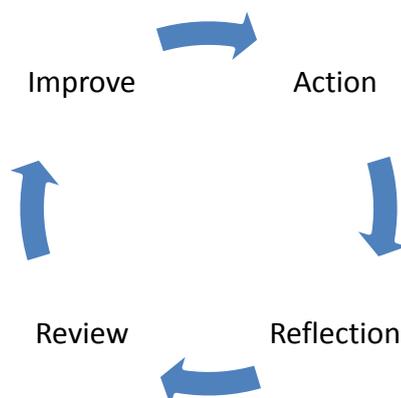


Figure 2: The Reflective process – the cyclical model

The work of Schön (1983, 1987) is recognised as being seminal in the area of reflective practice. Schön, classically, identified two kinds of reflective action, which he labelled 'Reflection-in-action' and 'Reflection-on-action'. Reflection-in-action is typically defined as 'reflection on the hoof' where the practitioner reflects on their actions during an event. Reflection-in-action is the ability of practitioners to 'think about what they are doing while they are doing it'. It may be that something is not going well and the reflection therefore seeks to improve the situation. Here, the practitioner will often make informed decisions based on impulsive reflections. On the other hand 'Reflection-on-action' is less impulsive; reflections are based on retrospective contemplation; the practitioner will reflect on actions that have already taken place. Such reflections normally (ideally) take place shortly after the event, are deliberately instigated, and frequently authenticated by the use of appropriate evidence. Reflecting-on-action enables practitioners to spend some time exploring why they acted as they did, what was happening and so on. In doing this they develop a set of questions and ideas about their activities and practice. In this type of reflection the practitioner will seek to address those things that were successful and those that were less so and then, and, in both cases, seek to understand why and then use that learning to improve things in the future.

Practitioners by examining their own experiences and by critically reflecting on their feelings will build a new understanding of their own situation. Frequently such situations will be unique and may contain uncertainty. Based on available information practitioners will devise a plan of action calling upon their previous experiences, their existing knowledge base and any other relevant information that they have access to. However, even then the course of action that they follow may not necessarily obey an established or proven line. "Reflection is an abstract construct with its existence being assumed on the basis of observed performance and expressed beliefs. The capacity for reflection is embedded in values, assumptions and, expectations" (Larrivee, 2008:345). So rather than just accepting what happens, a significant part of this complex process involves practitioners scrutinizing their own beliefs,

assumptions, judgments, prejudices, emotions, feelings, actions and the resulting consequences. Based on previous experience practitioners will engage with the situation and by considering what has gone before and seek to anticipate what might happen next, based on their knowledge, experience and intuition, they will develop a theory and a response to help them deal with the new situation.

### ***Teacher Reflection***

Teacher reflection has become increasingly important for both trainees and established classroom practitioners (Pollard, 2008). Teachers in their reflections are encouraged to identify and examine, in context, those things that impact upon their thoughts and actions. The context in which learning takes place can be a very powerful factor. Reflection, in context enables the practitioner to gain a better understanding of their situation and as a consequence explore viable alternatives with the potential to produce positive change. "Reflection is generally assumed to promote understanding and insight and to have transformation or empowerment as its purpose or effect" (Ottesen, 2007:32). Essentially reflection is thinking about why practitioners do certain things, how those things impact upon what they are doing and how that affects other people; it is looking back at what has taken place in order to do things differently in the future (Shoffner, 2008). Reflection as a means of promoting critical approaches to teaching and learning with the aim of improving practice is widespread (see Husu et.al., 2008; Oser et.al., 1992; Hobbs, 2007; Artzt and Armour-Thomas, 2001; Mayes, 2001; Swain, 1998). According to Ottesen (2007:33) "proper reflection is often described as a tool for connecting experience and theory frequently postulating a need for advancement to a higher level of theorising". The difficulty is that, for many, critical reflection is not easy and reflections tend to be "superficial and guarded" (Hobbs, 2007:413) and this is further compounded by the fact "that pressure to perform well academically discourages honest and uninhibited reflection" (p413)

Ideally reflection should consider the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviours that are appropriate to

classroom practice. This is the essence of Schön's (1983, 1987) concept of the 'Reflective Practitioner' which has become foundational to the work undertaken within the education community. Interestingly the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland document outlining its teacher competences is called 'Teaching: the Reflective Profession' (DENI, 2007). Teacher reflection seeks to critically evaluate experiences from both the past and the present and to use that information to inform and enhance what practitioners will do in the future. Consequently teacher reflection is part of an 'on-going' process which demands reflection before, during, and after teaching. In this regard, it must not be viewed as 'an event' but as a part of an 'on-going' process, informing and shaping the teacher's knowledge (Husu et al., 2008). Reflection must be more than a commentary on what took place in the classroom, it must focus on understanding teaching itself. Such a level of understanding demands interaction between knowledge and practical experience (Ottesen, 2007).

Increasingly reflective practice is viewed as the hallmark of professional competence for teaching. Indeed there is a general acceptance of the need to prepare professionals to be reflective practitioners (Larrivee, 2008). Teacher reflection means that individuals will view their own work through the critical lens of another with the anticipated aim of developing their own personal and professional skills (Husu, 2009).

According to Shoffner (2008) reflection is worthwhile because it enables classroom practitioners to identify, analyse and manage complex classroom issues. Furthermore practitioners are forced to question their practice and consequently gain a better understanding of their own beliefs. As a result those same practitioners will begin to contemplate more fully the relationship between theory and practice and to question those things normally understood to be accepted knowledge. Larrivee (2008) identifies four distinct levels of reflection represented diagrammatically as:

- Level 1 – Pre-reflection: at this level of reflection things are taken for granted and accepted without question. Teachers respond to situations which they believe to be beyond their control; reflections are superficial.
- Level 2 – Surface Reflection: at this level reflections focus on how to achieve specific objectives and standards. Reflections are supported by evidence with an increasing awareness of the need to accommodate different learners.
- Level 3 – Pedagogical Reflection: at this level the teacher evaluates what they do in the classroom and consider show that impacts upon pupil learning.
- Level 4 – Critical Reflection: at this level on-going reflection and critical inquiry into teaching actions and thinking processes are central and significantly important.

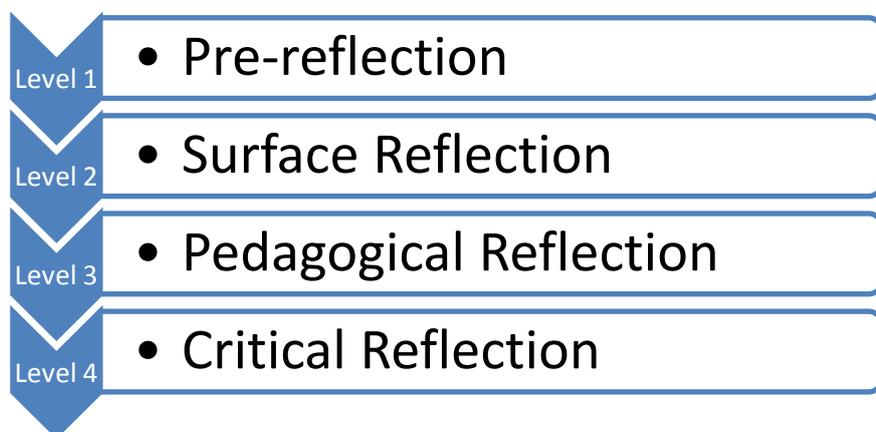


Figure 3 – Levels of Reflection

At level 1 reflection tends to be rather shallow in nature whereas as at Level 4 it is much more intrusive and searching. At Level 1 reflection is considered to be an obligation that has to be performed or a task to be met but at Level 4 it is central and fundamental to the way in which the practitioner learns. The aim of this unique project was to move the student teacher to Level 4 and encourage them to embrace the full process of 'critical reflection'. The theoretical framework for this study is based on an adaption of Larrivee's model (see Figure 4). Level 1 reflection tends to be limited in both breadth and depth; reflection at this level is largely inconsequential and insignificant. However, as the practitioner traverses the levels of reflection from Level 1 to Level 4 their engagement with the reflective process increases and their depth of reflection becomes complex; reflections at this level are profound, sincere and insightful. Level 1 reflection tends to be relatively safe and does not present too much risk to the practitioner whereas Level 4 reflection is more unsafe and there are potentially higher risks attached. All four levels of reflection in this theoretical framework sit along a continuum where low level reflection is at one end, where there is limited or superficial evaluation, and where at the other end there is a high level of reflective practice which is profound and insightful. At one end it focuses on teaching functions, actions and skills, generally considering single teaching episodes or isolated events right through to, at the other end, higher order reflection where

the teacher examines the ethical, social and political consequences of their teaching and grapples with the purposes of schooling.

Larrivee (2008:344) refers to these as the "layers of quality moving from trivial, to significant, to potentially profound. Increasing levels involve higher forms of thought, moving from issues of practicality to values and belief". This process of critical "reflection is believed to be a genuine way of fostering change in teachers' professional action" (Husu, 2008:39). Similarly Rogers (2002) argues that in order for reflection to be of value it needs to move the learner from one level of experience to a higher level. The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland also states that its "competence statements are predicated upon the notion that the achievement of competence is a developmental process which, of necessity, transcends early teacher education and continues throughout a teacher's career" (DENI, 2007:11).

**The Challenge of Reflection**

Yet despite the reported value of the reflective process, Shoffner (2008:123) notes that "reflection is not a common professional behaviour among teachers despite its ability to improve teaching and support learning". She suggests that difficulties arise because teaching is an emotionally charged activity and critical reflection, which is central to the process,

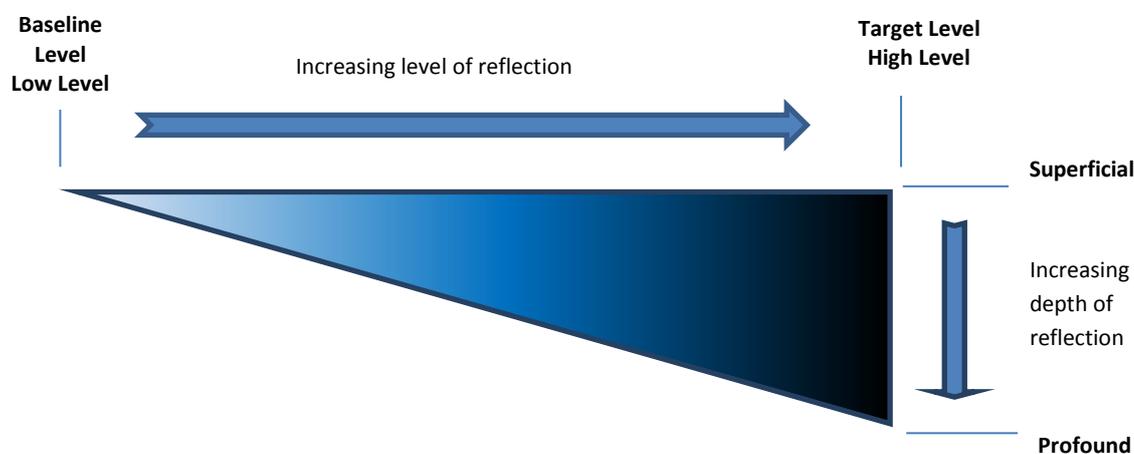


Figure 4: A Theoretical Framework for Reflection within this study

demands emotional engagement as the practitioner is required to examine and question their own personal beliefs and values. Reflective practice has the potential to improve teaching and support learning and yet according to Shoffner (2008) there are a number of barriers which theoretically impede this process such as the need for the practitioner to move outside their own comfort zone and the time required to engage in the process. In addition teaching and learning are complex inter-related activities and there is no correct approach to guarantee success. Critical reflection enables the practitioner to use their whole life experience as the basis for learning. In such a process the learner understands complex experiences, applies theory and is able to use that information and experience to solve problems. Yet according to Hobbs (2007:406) "not every individual is necessarily capable of engaging in critical reflection". Critical reflection demands genuine self-examination; this can be difficult and on occasions very painful (Hobbs, 2007). Husu et al (2008) suggest that teacher reflection has the potential to aid professional development however its power to do this depends on the person involved and the approach they adopt. Furthermore, Husu (2008:40) comments that, "in practice, reflective analysis does not come naturally; it requires dialogue". Reflection works better when there is interaction with others; the expressing of ideas and thoughts to a third party in a clear and unambiguous manner tends to reveal both the inherent strengths and weaknesses that may exist. In addition reflection, if it is to be of value, needs to be conducted in an organised and systematic manner.

### **The development of the CEP as a reflective tool**

The use of a CEP, or its equivalent, for teachers is now statutory throughout the UK regions. Leaving aside slight variations in structure, style and format each of these essentially seek to achieve the same outcome. In England, it is referred to as a Career Entry and Development Profile (CEDP). The CEDP is primarily an online resource aimed at trainee and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) to encourage them to focus on their achievements and to plan goals early in their professional careers and urge them to discuss their professional development needs with others (TDA (n.d.). In

Wales the purpose of the CEP is to support the transition from Initial Teacher Training (ITT) to Induction by summarising the NQTs' strengths and priorities for further development; guiding their initial thoughts about the type of school or particular post in which they will begin Induction; and requiring the new teacher to set objectives for professional development and develop an action plan for their Induction period (Welsh Assembly, 2009). In Scotland, it is referred to as an Initial Professional Development Action Plan (IPDAP) and encourages the NQT to identify their development needs by: specifying what facets of learning and teaching they are going to address and what they hope to achieve as a result, how they plan to implement that process and how they will realise and evaluate the outcomes (GTC Scotland (n. d.). In Northern Ireland the CEP provides a summary of the student teacher's Initial Teacher Education profile (ITE) and helps to prepare them for induction by encouraging them to reflect on their achievements and to set goals for the early part of their teaching career (GTCNI, 2008).

Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland is competence based and the professional competences the student teacher develops during initial teacher education are further honed during induction. The induction period enables the beginning teacher to develop their professional competences and apply them with pupils in the classroom. As a result it was decided by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (1998) that all graduating student teachers would create a Career Entry Profile (CEP). The CEP: (i) gives the beginning teacher the opportunity to reflect on their personal and professional competence in a critical and candid manner; (ii) encourages tutor evaluation; (iii) welcomes school evaluation of work undertaken by the student on placement; (iv) seeks identification of strengths and priorities for future development; and (v) represents the beginning of a career-long process of on-going professional development. It was also agreed that the CEP and its content would be owned by the student teacher and therefore could only be used for target setting and professional development (DENI, 2010).

### Focus of the Study

This study focuses on one particular innovative approach to the completion of the CEP as devised by staff in one ITE institution in Northern Ireland. Here, students engage in different placements in each of the four years of their degree programme. The demands upon the student increase in each of these placements, for example in terms of: the time required; the workload undertaken; the teaching contact involved and the level of reflection demanded. Typically, in first year reflection focuses on lessons taught by peers using a predefined template, in second year the focus is on one lesson per day and within these, two strengths and one area for development are identified. In third year the focus is on the overall teaching completed each day and the identification of suitable strategies for action and to then follow these up. In fourth year the students identify their overall strengths and areas for development and give consideration to how these might be addressed. In this model the process becomes less prescriptive as the flexibility for personal reflection increases. The process employed with the University College is to give greater responsibility and autonomy to the student as they reflect. Reflection must be something that the student does for themselves rather than something that is 'done to them'. As already outlined the completion of a CEP is mandatory for all students completing initial teacher education programmes.

The aim of this unique study was to better understand, from the students' perspective, if the process adopted by the ITE provider caused them to reflect, personally and professionally, and in a more critical and analytical way on their own work as classroom practitioners. In addition this study sought to understand more fully the benefits and challenges that students perceive to result from their engagement in this way.

At the end of SBW all final year post-primary students, in order to complete their CEPs, were asked to critically and candidly '**Reflect**' on their own personal and professional competence as aspiring classroom practitioners. Such reflections were positioned in relation to the 27 competence statements determined by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland. Such competences relate to: (i) Professional Values and Practice; (ii) Professional Knowledge and Understanding; and (iii) Professional Skills and Application. As a part of this process the students seek to candidly identify (i) their own strengths and (ii) those areas that they consider to require them to engage in further professional development. To aid this process of critical reflection the students conducted a SWOT analysis of their personal and professional classroom competence (SWOT is an analytical and strategic planning tool used to evaluate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). In this context, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were collectively considered to be indicative of those areas that demanded further professional development. In order to add significant rigour to the whole process the students were required to '**Select**' appropriate evidence to substantiate any claims of strength or area for development. Furthermore in order to reinforce the whole process of reflection students were restricted in the quantity of evidence that they were permitted to include within their portfolio; 20 A4 sides. Students then used this information to complete their CEPs. In addition all students were given 5 minutes, using PowerPoint, to present and '**Defend**' their reflections using the supporting evidence to a tutor and a school principal. The students submitted their portfolios one month after the completion of their School Based Work placement.

### Methodology

An anonymous questionnaire was completed voluntarily by students immediately after their assessed presentation over 2 years (cohort 1 and cohort 2). This questionnaire comprised a range of attitudinal items inviting students to express their opinion using a five-point scale where 1 is the lowest rating and 5 is the highest. Typically, these focussed on the student perceptions pre and post-presentation such

as “The assessment has made me more aware of my strengths.” and “The assessment has heightened my awareness of what a CEP is”. Students were also able to add additional comments typically “What did you find most challenging about this Year 4 SBW assignment and why?” and “What strategies did you employ in order to cope with the challenges?”

In total 68 (out of 84) students completed the questionnaires in 2008 (n=33) and 2009 (n=35), representing a return rate of 81%. Of those who responded, 63% were female and 37% male. Of the three main subjects offered at the ITE institution, there were equal numbers from Business Studies (38%) and Religious Studies (38%) and slightly fewer from Technology and Design (24%).

In 2009 a focus group was held to explore the student feedback in more qualitative depth, student attendance at this was voluntary.

Finally, a short questionnaire was sent out to the four participating principals, all of whom responded with detailed

comments. Here, the questions focused on what the principals saw as the strengths and weaknesses of the process from their external point of view.

**Results: Feedback from Students**

**Anxiety**

Students were first asked to consider how anxious they had felt in the period leading up to the assessment. Using a scale of 1-5 (where 1 is least and 5 is most) students were asked to rate the extent to which they had felt anxious. The mean score over the two cohorts was 3.63 with only a slight reduction from the first cohort (3.67 in 2007-08) to the second (3.59 in 2008-09). Overall almost three fifths (58.2%) of the students rated their level of anxiety as 4 or 5. Differences were also found between male and female students’ anxiety ratings ( $p < 0.005$ , Mann-Whitney  $U = 293,000$ ,  $Z = 3.025$ ). As can be clearly seen from Figure 5, female students tended to be more anxious than their male counterparts prior to the assessment.

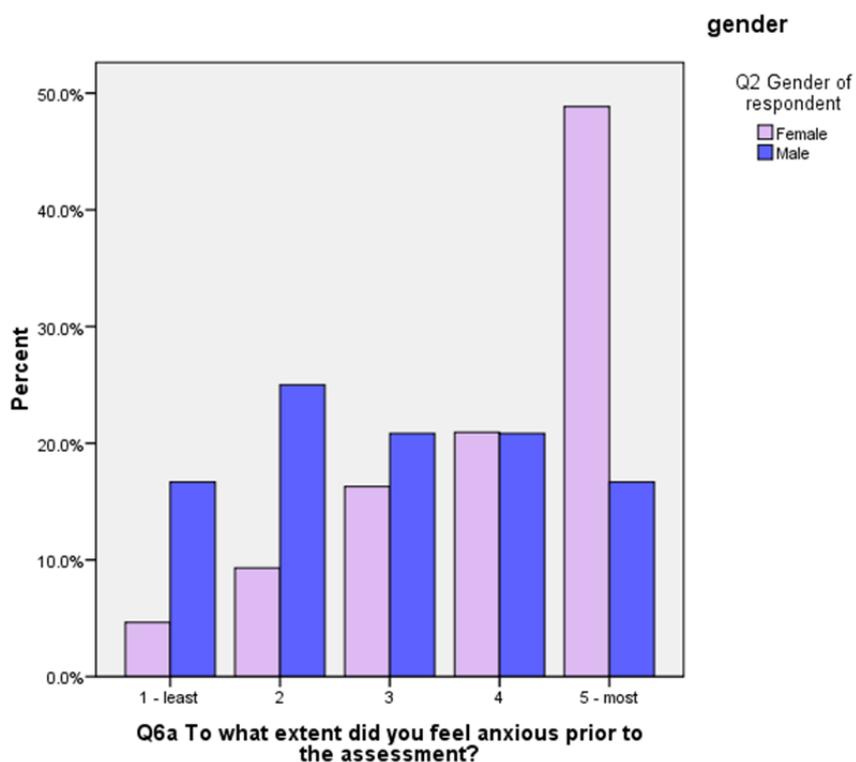


Figure 5 - Student anxiety prior to the assessment by gender

The mean score for female students was 4.00 while for male students the mean score was 2.96. The strength of this relationship between the gender of the student and their pre-assessment anxiety was not particularly strong ( $r=0.367$ ). When asked what caused most anxiety, many of the students referred to the stress caused by the fact that they would have to make their presentation in front of a school principal and that they would be asked unprepared questions afterwards. Students also berated the fact that the submission of the portfolio fell so close to other deadlines.

*Getting up in front of a tutor and principal and talking; forming good answers to questions (Female Religious Studies student, 2008-09)*

*Having to present in front of a headmaster was the most intimidating part, although it was a useful exercise. (Male Technology & Design student, 2008-09)*

### Challenge

Using the same scale, students were asked to rate the degree to which they felt challenged by the preparation for the assessment. The mean score over both cohorts was 3.42, and once again there was also a difference (though this fell just short of being statistically significant) between the two genders. The mean rating for female students was 3.60 while for males it was 3.09. There was a slight difference between the two cohorts in terms of the rating: in the first year the mean rating was 3.28 while in the second year this rose to 3.56, perhaps reflecting the timing of submission of other assignments (most notably the dissertation) to which many students referred in their questionnaire responses. In the focus group, participants were asked whether the prospect of the involvement of the school principal added to the challenge for the students. The response was informative and positive on the whole:

*Student 1: We see you [University tutors] day in, day out and it's a nice, informal situation, and more credit to yourselves for the kind of environment you create, but when a principal is there, you could be teaching in his school, this year or next year, and you want him to be able to say 'I remember that student. He sounded good'. If it's neck and neck in an*

*interview, that could sway it....It's good experience. It takes you out of that cosy environment that [University] likes to put you in, and the principals are judging you, so you have to be on your game the whole time. (Male Technology & Design student, 2008-09)*

*Student 2: For me any presentation you do is nerve-racking anyway. I think if you said you weren't nervous, there would be something wrong with you, but the principal...I don't want to say it...forced you to up your game, because you had to give that wee bit more for the principal. (Male Technology & Design student, 2008-09)*

*Researcher: Would you say it was more daunting?*

*Student 3: It was daunting but I think it can be nice to have someone that's fresh at the same time. (Male Business Studies student, 2008-09)*

### Was it worthwhile?

Looking back on the entirety of the assessment process, students were asked to consider how worthwhile they found it, again using a five-point scale. Overall the mean score was 3.60 (Std. Dev. = 1.21) across both cohorts with almost 57% awarding a rating of 4 or 5. If we look at the results in more detail, there was a slight rise between the first and second cohorts (from 3.55 to 3.65) and a small difference between the mean score for female students (3.61) and male students (3.58). A range of aspects were appreciated by two of the students in the focus group, notably the value of the interaction with the principal and tutor and the skills development involved:

*I would draw valuable experience from every area: the professionalism of having to reflect on yourself; the critical skills you are developing are priceless throughout the rest of your career; the presentation was an excellent opportunity to stand up and for those who hadn't experience of an interview, then being able to discuss it, say how they felt their presentation went and get, not a grilling from a principal, but some feedback: I thought that was valuable as well; putting it all together: that was good use of ICT and presentation skills and it's a valuable package to take into school. So there are good points in every area. (Male Technology & Design student, 2008-09)*

**Learning Gains**

Both the questionnaire and the focus group sought to identify what students perceived to be the greatest learning gains from the assessment process. In this regard it must be noted that the questionnaires were completed *immediately* following the presentations, when students had not had the time to reflect in depth on the range of learning gains. The focus group was by contrast conducted several weeks later. In the questionnaire students were asked first to rate the importance of seven potential learning gains, again using a scale of 1-5. Students were also invited to note additional comments below. When the mean scores for each learning gain are calculated, the ranking in descending order of importance (across both cohorts) is as in Table 1.

Although there were no significant differences between the two cohorts, there was a significant difference noted between gender and their rating of learning gains in four of the areas suggested in this question. Most notably, female students tended to value more highly their increased confidence in presenting in front of a principal (female mean score=4.07, male mean score=3.42,  $p < 0.05$ , Mann-Whitney  $U = 342,500$ ,  $Z = 2.388$ ) and also rated more highly the improvement in their presentation skills (female mean score=3.86, male mean score=3.21,  $p < 0.05$ , Mann-Whitney  $U = 348,000$ ,  $Z = 2.316$ ). It would thus seem that although the

female students tended to be more anxious beforehand, they also tended to identify greater gains in terms of their confidence and presentation skills.

As the results in Table 1 reveal, the highest learning gain was in the awareness of what a CEP is. Students in the focus group were able to elaborate on this and stressed that because of the level of self-reflection required to complete the SWOT analysis and the selection of accompanying supporting evidence, the resulting CEP was a much more useful and ‘honest’ piece of work :

*Student 1: It's a more honest document, because you actually did do the ground work. I could write a CEP now for you, and I could say I was using the best learning strategies in the world, but if I haven't really reflected on it and if I haven't got that evidence there to back it up, then I could say anything. It's true, it's honest, it's the bare bones. You're not in a situation where you are saying 'I have a weakness. I don't want to talk about it'. It's real. It's the evidence behind it from the four years: that's what makes it real. (Male Technology & Design student, 2008-09)*

*Student 2: I think if we didn't have the supporting evidence; it would have been a lot more difficult to do the CEP, because your evidence – you're talking about it in your CEP so I think it is important. I am surprised: I didn't realise the GTC didn't expect you to have any evidence. (Male Business Studies student, 2008-09)*

Table 1: Students' perceptions of the learning gains from the assessment process:

Learning Gain	Mean Score (1-5)
The assessment has heightened my awareness of what a CEP is	4.00
The assessment has made me more aware of my strengths	3.90
The assessment has made me more aware of my priorities for future development	3.88
The assessment has encouraged me to be more reflective of my teaching	3.88
The assessment has given me confidence in presenting in front of a principal	3.00
The assessment has developed my skills in selecting relevant supporting evidence	3.73
The assessment has developed my presentation skills	3.63

**Appropriate forms of assessment**

Finally students were asked whether they felt that this was the most appropriate form of assessment of school placement. The results were not overwhelmingly positive at all: almost half of respondents (46.3%) agreed that this was the best form of assessment, but over a quarter (28.4%) disagreed, leaving the remaining quarter (25.4%) undecided. There was a fall in the approval rating from 48.5% in 2007-08 to 44.1% in 2008-09. If the results are examined by gender, then once again we see that the female students were less positive about the assessment method than the male students (mirroring their higher anxiety levels discussed above): over twice as many female students (34.9% of female

students compared to just 16.7% of males) did not feel that this was the most appropriate form of assessment for school placement.

When asked to rate a number of potential assessment methods on a five point scale, the most popular method was the current practice of the presentation of the CEP to University tutors and a school principal (mean score 3.68), closely followed by the idea of a presentation to University tutors alone (3.64) without principals. Least popular was the idea of a written assignment, and this is reflected in a number of comments on the questionnaires. Figure 7 (overleaf) shows the results in more detail with mean scores added.

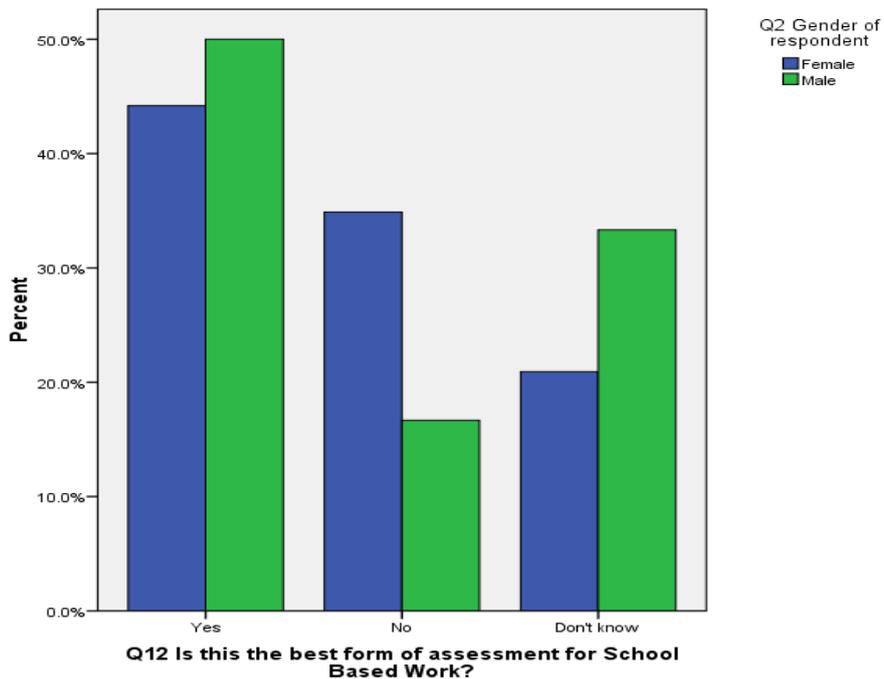


Figure 6 - Best form of Assessment for School Based Work

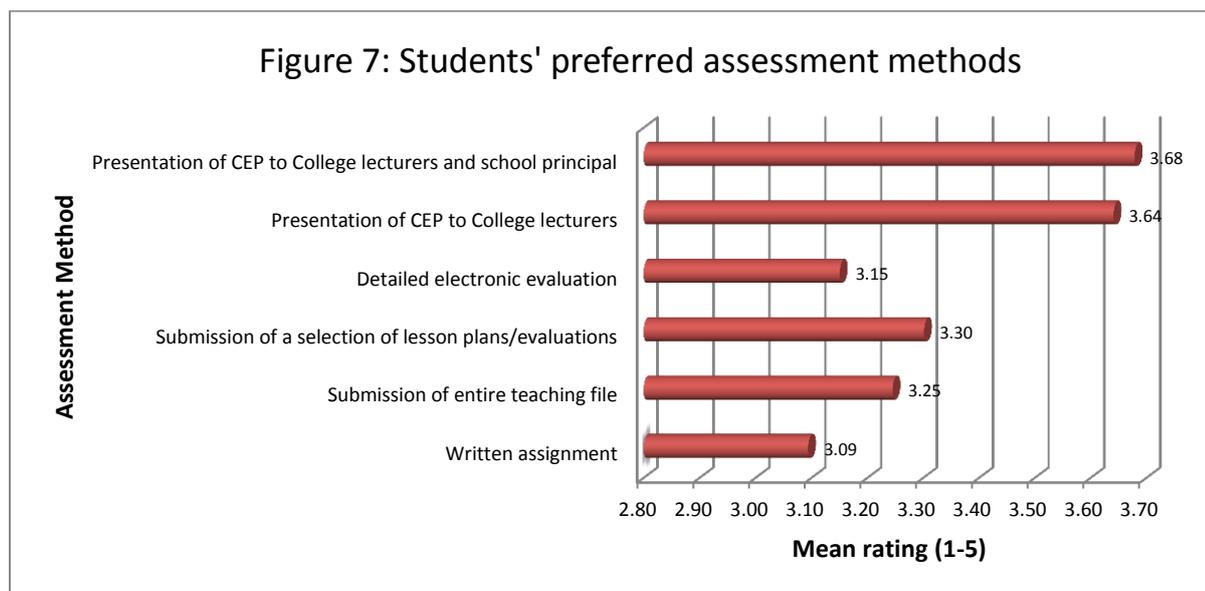


Figure 7 – Students' preferred assessment methods

When the results are analysed by gender of respondent, a significant difference emerges in only one area: female students were more positive than their male counterparts about the notion of submitting their entire teaching file: the mean rating for female students was 3.68 compared to just 2.47 for male students ( $p < 0.005$ , Mann-Whitney  $U = 116,500$ ,  $Z = 2.973$ ). While one might have expected there to be a significant difference in scoring of the presentations between genders, no such difference was found at all. Indeed if anything the female students' rating of the presentation as an assessment method was very marginally higher than that of the male students.

### Criticisms

In terms of criticisms of the process, the comments on the questionnaires (which were of course anonymous) were more revealing than the focus groups. Many students here felt that the assessed observations of teaching were sufficient assessment without the added imposition of such a major piece of work at the end, which in some students' opinion, ought to be worth more marks, given the amount of time and effort invested. The following comments are typical of this sentiment:

*[There] should be no written element in yr 4 as students are already under enough pressure with dissertations (Female Religious Studies student 2007-08).*

*However I felt that the amount of marks dedicated to the SWOT analysis, CEP and presentation is not reflective of the amount of work put in to their creation, increase the marks! (Male Technology & Design student 2008-09).*

*The presentation was completely intimidating and I found it to be very unnecessary (Male Business Studies student 2008-09).*

### Discussion

The theoretical framework adopted and used in this study is one of encouraging student teacher practitioners to move from the Baseline Level in the reflective process (reflections which are limited in breadth and depth and as a result largely inconsequential and insignificant) to Target Level (reflections which are deep and complex and as a result profound, sincere and insightful). This framework was used to more fully understand if the process adopted by the ITE provider caused the student teachers to reflect more critically and analytically on their own work and to understand more fully the benefits and the challenges that students perceived to

result from their engagement in the process. The process of personal and professional reflection, as worked through by the students (conducting a SWOT analysis: gathering and selecting evidence; organising and presenting that evidence to substantiate personal and professional reflections of competence; the reduction and presentation of the material into a formal CEP; the preparation of an effective time-bound presentation; and the actual presentation of their material in a coherent, structured and logical manner) is a demanding one. From the principals' own point of view the benefits were also clear: all of the principals mentioned that the process had given them a greater insight into the work of the ITE provider and also the 'calibre' of beginning teachers, whose best work was being showcased and effectively 'disseminated'. One principal added that as a result of their involvement, they had also gained 'a clear insight into ways as a school perhaps we can better support student teachers.' Evidence would indicate that there are a significant number of benefits to be gained from the process of self-reflection adopted by the students in this study.

### ***The Benefits***

Evidence from this unique study would appear to suggest that the 'Reflect-Select-Defend' model creates reflections which are overtly critical, candid and constructive in nature. The students are, throughout the process, encouraged to consider issues that in the past they would have tended to 'gloss over' or even simply ignore. The process has moved the student away from making rather generic statements, which show little or no real evidence of reflection, to a position where the reflections have both substance and immense value. The model therefore facilitates reflection on a much more profound level, moving from the superficiality of Larrivee's (2008) level 1 towards more valuable insightful and critical reflections at level 4. In addition the students are genuinely seeking to see how they can use these reflections to improve and enhance their own performance as aspiring classroom practitioners, both at a personal and professional level. The reflections undertaken by the students are based on their own deliberations; it is something over which they have full control; it is not something that others are doing for

them. The students identify those areas which they consider to be their strengths alongside those areas that they consider to be worthy of further development; it is thus genuine and independent self-reflection. The students have opportunities to reflect on the entirety of their four year degree course and to move away from focussing on work completed within their final year. Furthermore responses of the four school principals in their questionnaire were generally very positive regarding the assessment process. When asked about the main benefits of the process, the principals referred primarily to the degree of self-reflection which was required on the part of the participating students. The whole process of critical self-reflection places the student in a very positive position, one where they can move forward as classroom practitioners through the phases of Induction, Early Professional Development and on into Continuing Professional Development.

Furthermore an additional benefit for the student focuses on the compilation of the evidential material that they gather together to support their various reflective claims. The process of gathering this material, selecting appropriate evidence from it and collating it into a presentable format is an important part of the reflective process for the student. The principals who had given freely of their time to read through the student portfolios, to sit in on the presentations and to challenge the students with regards to their reflections were very positive about the process that the students had engaged with. One principal wrote, 'I feel it forces the students to reflect in a very real and meaningful way with regard to their readiness to enter the classroom'. Another principal remarked that he/she had been impressed by the 'calibre, personality, their detailed preparation, some excellent portfolio work and their range of skills in presentation.' Generally the students were pleased with the portfolios of evidence they collated as a result of their four years of ITE study and of the depth of work they had engaged with; for the majority this was satisfying and reassuring as they moved towards fulltime employment. The reflection, selection, creation and subsequent presentation of the portfolio of evidence is something the student has total ownership of. The importance of making reflections

evidence-based is emphasised by Pollard (2008), and this reflection on the portfolio of evidence this helps to provide the student with more a holistic view of the learning that they have engaged with throughout their degree course and of the experiences gained. Students cannot be asked for their CEPs at any stage during the selection and recruitment process for a school teaching position however many of the students consider the portfolio of material they had collated and produced to provide a very powerful indication of their personal capabilities and some suggested they would voluntarily bring these portfolios with them to interviews. In addition it reflects very clearly the nature, standard, level and quality of the work that the students are capable of producing and of the commitment that they have to the teaching profession. In essence the students were proud of the work they had produced, and in particular that contained within their portfolio of evidence.

In addition there are significant benefits for the student teacher in relation to the opportunities provided to enhance their presentational skills. The presentation, within a tightly defined time period, of the completed CEP and the associated evidence demands a certain skill set from the students. The need to plan and present the material in a logical, coherent, fluent and effective manner is one which is challenging but nonetheless useful. Typically, the students need to develop skills related to reflection such as selection, presentation (auditory and visual) and time management. Given the fact that the students were allocated a 5 minute slot to make their individual presentations this required them to be personally well-organised and to have the material well-planned and structured.

Moreover, students found the experience of presenting to a university tutor and a school head teacher challenging yet beneficial, because it gave them the opportunity to gain valuable interview practice. The formal presentation gave the student the opportunity to present the material in whatever manner they considered to be most appropriate. Following the presentation students are asked a number of

questions about the work that they have been doing; these questions they reported were searching and demanding but nonetheless worthwhile. The whole process they considered useful; they were able to prepare in advance for the presentation but the questions that followed were much less predictable. The students suggested that the defence of their work was challenging and created significant pressure for them, and in some cases stress, but that it did provide them with ideal preparation for subsequent job interviews. Students undergo interview preparation as a part of their final year course but they considered the presentation associated with this reflective 'Reflect-Select-Defend' process to be more intensive and indeed helpful to them. In addition the students were advised to approach the presentational aspect of the process, to the panel, in a professional manner and they found the constructive comments from both the College tutor and the visiting principal to be helpful; in particular the principals were able to make insightful and judicious comments about the presentations that tutors would have found more difficult because of their closer relationship to the student. When asked to identify the main areas in which students need further guidance, three of the principals mentioned the need for students to improve their presentation skills: 'in particular not reading off a script' and the importance of using PowerPoint to illustrate key points rather than providing a densely worded distraction. In terms of the content of the portfolios, principals' comments focused often on the poor spelling displayed by some of the students, especially in the CEP itself. Two principals also mentioned that some of the students could have thought more about their dress code for what was a formal interview process.

In affirming the value of critical self-reflection for beginning teachers, the principals identified a number of further qualities which they judged to be most desirable in beginning teachers. These included academic standards and subject knowledge, the ability to listen and take advice, a willingness to learn, an 'absolute commitment' to extra-curricular activities, and putting the child 'at the centre of all they do'.

### ***The Challenges***

Overall there are significant benefits to be gained from the adopted, 'Reflect-Select-Defend', process but at the same time significant challenges remain. There are many challenges but the main issues revolve around anxiety, workload and requirement; this is entirely consistent with the views of Shoffner (2008). It is generally recognised that few, if any, of the students actually looked forward to the process as outlined and that it did create anxiety for some. However the anxiety factor would appear to have been more significant for female students than for the male students. The evidence suggests that female students were keener to submit full teaching files in preference to selecting evidence to represent the breadth and the depth of their work. The reasons for the apparent heightened anxiety amongst female students are not particularly clear. Whether the female students put more work into the process or treated it more seriously is not possible to determine. Similarly whether the male students more successfully masked their personal anxieties is not abundantly clear. In either case the findings are in line with the views of Hobbs (2007) who suggests that not everyone finds the reflective process an easy one. However, on reflection, some of the students managed to see beyond the anxiety and recognise the immense value that is to be gained for them, both personally and professionally, from working through this structured and challenging process.

Another significant challenge for students related to what they perceived to be the workload involved. Clearly the process of thorough reflection is a complex and time consuming one but yet one that, if conducted properly, can be both rewarding and enlightening. The requirement for the students to submit no more than 20 A4 sides of evidence is set to encourage more critical and analytical reflection. Whilst the students accept the restriction on the volume of evidence that they can submit they tend to consider this as a challenge. In addition they see the process as a very time consuming one. However, it is also recognised that a number of the students put undue pressure upon themselves as they strive for perfection. In addition they do not always

recognise that deep reflection can be costly in terms of the time required to do it properly.

### **Conclusion**

The limitations of the current study are acknowledged; engagement in the focus group in 2009 was entirely voluntary and conducted by University tutors. There are therefore obvious limitations to the validity of the data, given that some of the participants may have felt intimidated or pressured to express more favourable comments. It is also noted that it would have been advantageous to have conducted a parallel focus group for cohort 1 in 2007-08.

In Northern Ireland the statutory obligation is for the graduating student to complete a 3-page CEP, where one page is allocated to general background information, one to considered strengths and the final one to perceived areas for further development. The process involved in this research study goes far beyond that statutory requirement. The ITE provider recognises this but sees the completion of the task as one which very effectively contributes to the reflective process and ultimately student learning. Consideration of the work over the years has shown that the outcome, in terms of the completed CEP and its content, is significantly better since the introduction of this detailed process of reflection than that previously submitted. The 'Reflect-Select-Defend' process is effectively a means to an end; the end being the completed CEP however, the process of getting to the end point is just as important as, and possibly more important than the final outcome.

In conclusion it is contended the 'Reflect-Select-defend' CEP model challenges students to reflect more critically and candidly on their own work and to take greater responsibility for their professional development, than that demanded elsewhere within the UK. The outcomes of the research on the reflective process worked through with the students would suggest that there is potential value to be gained in Northern Ireland by the General Teaching Council and the Department of Education adopting this model. Furthermore it is suggested, based on a review of the processes adopted

by the various General Teaching Councils across each of the UK jurisdictions, that there is merit to be gained in a process that requires students to 'Reflect-Select-Defend'. All CEPs (or equivalent), in common, require practitioners to 'reflect' to some extent but this study suggests that the added elements in the process of 'Selection' and 'Defence' add significant value and rigour to the process. The review of evidence and the careful selection of appropriate material within tightly defined limits and within a predefined time period (5 minute presentation) to substantiate any claims that are made is a challenging one. Furthermore the presentation and defence of that compiled portfolio adds significantly more demands to the process. We would suggest that there is considerable value to be gained from increasing the level of rigour attached to this process of developing the reflective capabilities of students. The 'Reflect-Select-Defend' CEP model encourages the students to engage fully with the process rather than passively accepting it as something that they must complete. The 'Reflect'-'Select'-'Defend' model seeks to engage practitioners in a rigorous process which aims to secure depth and breadth of reflection. As already indicated, the process of reflective practice is not unique to teaching and we would therefore contend that this particular model, 'Reflect'-'Select'-'Defend', has much to offer even to other professions outside of teaching that require practitioners to engage in the process of critical and analytical reflection.

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