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## Reflection : Journals and Reflective Questions : a Strategy for Professional Learning

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**REFLECTION: JOURNALS AND REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:  
A STRATEGY FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Reflective journals have been used widely in teacher education programs to promote reflective thinking (Freidus, 1998; Carter & Francis, 2000; Yost, Senter & Forlenzo-Bailey, 2000). Smyth (1992) advocated that posing a series of questions to be answered in written journals could enhance reflective thinking. It was for this reason that reflective responses to directed questions were introduced in 2002 and subsequently in 2003 in the Bachelor of Education 4th year primary internship program at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. The internship program provided a sustained ten-week period of time in a school that afforded student teachers the opportunity to examine their practice in an authentic setting of teaching. This paper reports on the process undertaken to assist internship students to understand the reflection process and their responses to reflective questions. These responses are analysed in relation to the internship students' professional learning using a framework described by Dietz (1998).*

**Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to examine the evidence, provided by the internship reflective journals, of the student teacher's learning and how this evidence matched the categories of learning Dietz (1998) described as the Professional Learning Cycle. This cycle, along with other models, is discussed and the student teacher's learning is analysed and discussed in relation to the four levels of development categorised by Dietz.

In the Internship in the Bachelor of Education at the University of Western

Sydney the student teachers were given the title of associate teachers to distinguish them from students undertaking a practicum. This title acknowledges the change in the role of the student teacher in that they were unsupervised in the classroom and took on the full responsibility of a teacher. The supervising teacher in the internship was called the colleague teacher, which acknowledged their changed role, as they became a mentor to the internship student.

Scribner, (1998) revealed that beginning teachers "need to be autonomous learners with a deep commitment to continued professional growth and development" (p.4). The internship is a strategy that allowed the associate teacher to become autonomous learners as it provided opportunities for these learners to take on the full role of a teacher without immediate supervision. How then do these inexperienced teachers become aware of and continue their professional learning and what factors can contribute to and enhance this learning? This study aimed to investigate professional learning with a particular focus on the practice of reflection as a powerful and effective means to promote student teacher professional learning.

This article will discuss through the literature the various learning cycles, reflection and journals and internships. It will also outline the internship at the University of Western Sydney and the processes put in place to encourage reflective practice. This discussion will be followed by a description of the

methodology used and the analysis and findings of the project.

### **Identifying a Professional Learning Cycle**

Kolb, 1984; Boud, 1993 and Dietz, 1998 all identified learning as a cyclic model where learning occurred through experience and through reflection. My understanding of professional learning is grounded in Dewey's philosophy (1938, 1966) that we learn from experience and reflection on that experience. Dewey (1966) has described the act of learning as "one of continual reorganising, reconstructing [and] transforming experience" (p.50). This paper relates professional learning to a person's experiences and the sense that is made of that experience for future action.

Although each of these models identified reflection as a significant part of the learning cycle Dietz's levels of learning were seen as a useful analysis tool to validate the associate teacher's professional learning.

### **The Dietz Model**

Dietz explained the professional learning cycle as consisting of four levels with key characteristics indicative of each of these levels. In the first level of *exploration*, identified by Dietz, the key characteristics were learning the territory, inquiring about a specific focus in the learner's teaching, assessing information, observing students and listening to others. The next level, *organisation*, was where the learner starts to make sense of things in the workplace such as practising routines, putting procedures in place, recognising pedagogy and learning theories in their day-to-day practice of teaching. It was at this level that the teacher-learner begins to place things in sequence and starts to make sense of the teaching environment. In the third level learners began to make the *connections* between one teaching situation and another. In this level the learner began to

move out of the constraints of a plan and modified and altered plans to accommodate student needs. *Reflection* was the fourth level where the learner made informed decisions based on the ability to reflect on their practice and responded to issues emerging from this reflection. Teaching responses were made based on these reflections.

### **Reflection and Journals**

To examine if professional learning could be identified through the internship reflective journal a review of the literature pertaining to reflection, in general, and specifically to reflective journals was undertaken.

Journals have been widely used in teacher education as a strategy to promote reflection (Freidus, 1998; Carter & Francis, 2000 & Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). Friedus (1998) in her research on reflection states that "...students learn to look for patterns and connections within and among the educational experiences they have found meaningful for themselves and their students" (p.56). In a study undertaken at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur in 1995, 35 students responded to a questionnaire on the impact of reflective journal writing. Sinclair & Woodward, (1997) stated in their findings from this study that 40 percent of the "students answering the questionnaire reported that journal writing affected their own learning most commonly by encouraging reflection upon that learning and their experiences and developing their ability to think more critically" (p.53). This study also found that students reported "an increased awareness... of their own learning or of their own strengths and weaknesses" (p.53). Sinclair and Woodward concluded, from this study, that reflective journals promoted professional development of student teachers, enabled them to make links between theory and practice and encouraged them to evaluate their teaching performance.

### **The Internship In Teacher Education**

For some years but particularly over the last five years the practicum and internship have received specific attention from researchers. This attention, informed by educational theories, was an attempt to understand the learning conditions in which students and beginning teachers gain the maximum benefit of professional learning. Ryan, Toohy & Hughes (1996) identified as crucial to the optimum learning condition for student and beginning teachers was the opportunity to reflect on or to examine their experiences. Grossman and Williston (2001) also were interested in investigating how undergraduate students are prepared to use reflection to guide their current and future understanding of their teaching and learning. They believed that reflection enabled students to develop a deeper understanding about children, teaching and themselves and this reflection, in effect, contributed to professional learning.

The internship is a model of transition from professional education to full-time work and is found in a number of professions, including teaching, law and medicine. Internships have been introduced worldwide into teacher education programs to prepare "beginning teachers to the realities of the school and classroom" (Johnson, Ratsoy, Holdaway & Friesen, 1993, p.297). The internship is seen as the bridge between university training and admission into qualified and paid employment.

Hatton and Smith (1995) have provided a comprehensive account of internship models worldwide. In Australia and the United Kingdom the internship has been aligned to practicum or field experience in initial teacher education. A changed role of the teacher and associate teacher is usually acknowledged in these programs, particularly emphasising the assistance and support provided by the teacher. In many

Australian institutions, including the University of Western Sydney, the internship was developed to *enable students to upgrade from a three-year Bachelor of Teaching degree to a four year Bachelor of Education degree.*

Hatton and Smith (1995) described the key features of an internship program as an extended placement in the workplace prior to full-time teaching. Internship programs provide a variety of teaching skills such as program planning and implementation, classroom management, professional learning and curriculum development. Associate teachers are nurtured through a close mentoring association with a more experienced teacher. Associate teachers (student teachers) are afforded the responsibility of undertaking teaching without the presence of another teacher in the classroom while at the same time being supported in their transition into full-time teaching by the close association they have with their colleague teacher. Reflective practice is an important component of the associate teacher's learning as they take on the full role of the teacher without the constant supervision and feedback provided by a supervising teacher.

### **The Internship and Reflective Practice at the University of Western Sydney**

The internship at the University of Western Sydney is conducted in the fourth year of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) program. The in-school component of the internship occupies the third term of the four-term school year. The colleague teacher is relieved from teaching, by the associate teacher, for three days per week to take part in negotiated educational projects within their school. Associate teachers' experience an assisted introduction to teaching designed around reflection on the characteristics of teaching through action research, reflective questions and reflections on teaching practices.

## The Reflective Process in the B.Ed Primary Internship at the University of Western Sydney

In this program reflection is seen as a critical catalyst for the development of professional learning.

There are four stages in the process. Stages one and two are undertaken at the University and stages three and four are undertaken at the school site.

- ∞ **Stage 1 Semester 1** Preliminary meetings of associate teachers prior to placement in schools.  
Initial focus questions posed
- ∞ **Stage 2 Semester 1**  
Week 5 meeting with Associate and Colleague Teachers  
Specific reflective questions posed to associate teachers
- ∞ **Stage 3 Term 3** Week 3 of the internship period in school  
Revisiting the focus questions and reflective dialogue with the associate and colleague teacher
- ∞ **Stage 4 Term 3**  
Week 8 of the Internship period in schools  
Reflective group discussion in a collegial environment

### Methodology

A qualitative paradigm was used in this study, which extended over a twelve-month period. Specifically, within the qualitative paradigm, an interpretive methodology was used. "Interpretivists see the goal of theorising as providing understanding of direct lived experience... The interpretivist attempts to capture the core of these meanings" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p.19). This study aimed to provide understanding of the lived experience of the associate teachers in their internship. The meaning of the associate teachers lived experiences were interpreted in two ways in this research. Responses to focus questions elicited from associate

teachers were interpreted in relation to Dietz' levels of learning. The author also interpreted the group discussion of the colleague and associate teachers to identify general themes that emerged from the discussion. These interpretations of meaning of the associate teachers lived experience of their internship is reported later in the analysis and discussion of the data.

### Participants

Ten of the thirteen associate teachers who were in their fourth year of the 2002 B. Ed Primary internship gave their consent for their reflective journal and verbal responses to be part of this study. There were nine females and one male participant with ages ranging from twenty two to thirty five years.

### Data Collection

The core of this study was to examine associate teachers' reflections through reflective question responses. The data for the research were drawn from three sources; responses to focus questions, specific reflective questions for journal responses and shared group reflective discussion. The focus questions and specific reflective question responses were matched with Dietz levels of learning.

### Responses to focus questions

At a first meeting with the associate teachers' three *focus questions* were posed to which they were asked to respond in writing. The focus questions were introduced as a strategy to engage associate teachers in thinking critically about their expected achievements for the completion of their internship. The questions were:-

- a) What are your expectations of the internship program?
- b) What do you hope to achieve from the internship?
- c) *How will you know if you have attained your outcomes?* These focus questions were chosen, to assist the associate teachers to reflect on their teaching, in order for them to understand their feelings and reasons for

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undertaking the internship. The focus questions were also used to promote reflection at a later stage in the internship program to gauge any changes in thinking about the internship. The responses from the associate teachers were included as part of the overall reflective journal at the conclusion of the internship. The focus questions provided a critical tool for what could be described as a preconception of the internship and later the realities of the "real classroom environment".

#### **Specific questions for journal responses**

The *specific reflective questions* posed by Dietz (1998) as she developed her model, were posed to the associate teachers at a meeting held with their colleague teachers. These questions were selected for associate teachers to respond to in their journals as they provided the scaffolding for the analysis of the associate teachers' responses in terms of Dietz's professional learning cycle. The associate teachers were asked to respond to the reflective questions at any time during the internship. There was no compulsion to respond to the questions at a specific time. As the associate teachers felt that they had something to say in response to a question they wrote in their journals. As their thoughts, knowledge and understandings crystallised through their internship experience they responded to the questions. The reflective responses to the questions were a compulsory component of the internship program but were not assessed because of the personal feelings, emotions, beliefs and values the questions elicited.

The specific reflective questions were:

- a) What are you currently observing in your teaching that is related to your interests as an educator?
- b) What would you like to know more about or be able to do differently in your professional practice?
- c) What are your theories about what the purpose of education will be in the twenty first century?

- d) From my perspective the primary indicators of student learning are...?
- e) My personal theory on how students learn is ...
- f) At our school I am most proud of...
- g) What new questions have emerged for you in regard to your teaching?
- h) What have you learned about yourself as a learner?

It was during this phase that discussions were held between the colleague teacher and the associate teacher. During the discussions the associate teachers were asked to engage in professional dialogue with their colleague teacher about their progress and their ongoing professional learning. At this stage the associate teachers, as they became more reflective, were supported by the guidance and assistance of their colleague teacher. Suggested areas for discussion at this meeting were recommended and included:

- a) the setting of specific goals by the associate teacher and target dates for their achievement;
- b) discussion of what had gone well to date in the internship and
- c) discussion of areas that needed development and suggestions for how these could be achieved.

These discussions provided the opportunity for associate teachers to engage in conversations with their colleague teachers to inform their practice through critical reflection. The associate teachers were asked to challenge themselves when faced with difficult situations and reconstruct their practice based on discussions with their colleague teacher. Associate teachers and colleague teachers gained insights into the issues confronted through these reflections. As a result of these meetings the associate teachers were able to modify their practice in light of their reflections. Schon (1987) described this process as reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-for-action. Data for this study was not collected from the one-on-one discussions with the associate teacher

and colleague teacher. These discussions were private and provided opportunities for the associate teacher and colleague teacher to discuss in confidence areas for development and to more ably respond to the reflective questions.

#### **Shared group reflective discussion**

The *shared group discussion* was used as a strategy in schools to foster reflection in a collegial and safe environment where the associate teachers shared their experiences and confirmed their practices with each other. The meetings were held twice during the internship period in two different schools with all colleague and associate teachers present. There were no specific questions asked at these meetings but rather the associate teachers and colleague teachers asked questions of each other. Questions were raised such as:

- a) What have you learnt from the internship?
- b) What challenges have you met in the internship?
- c) How have you reflected on your teaching practice during the internship?
- d) What will you do differently when you begin teaching?

In this collegial environment, shared group reflection was fostered. Overlapping experiences, confirmation of practices,

reinforcement and gains in confidence were typical outcomes of these meetings. Formal data was not collected during the shared group discussion. It was felt that formalising the process by utilising a tape recorder or note taking would inhibit the free flow of ideas which were exchanged during the discussion. However, the author recorded general themes that emerged from the group discussion after the meetings.

#### ***Analysis and discussion of the data***

*The data was analysed using the following three strategies:*

1. *Coding Dietz' Framework to describe each of the four levels of learning.*
2. *Alignment of data from the focus questions and specific reflective questions to Dietz' levels of learning.*
3. *Identification of themes that emerged from the shared group discussion.*

#### **Dietz Framework**

The Dietz model is one of continuous learning as teachers strengthen their understandings of their teaching. Within each level Dietz identified words that described each level. The coding of these words and phrases are depicted in Table 1

**Table 1**  
**Coding of Dietz' levels of learning descriptors**

<b>Dietz's Levels of Learning</b>	<b>Coding of descriptors</b>	<b>Words that describe each level of learning</b>
<i>Exploration</i>	E1	Exploring ideas
	E2	Inquiring about a specific focus
	E3	"Learning the territory"
	E4	Assessing information
	E5	Observing students
	E6	Listening to others
<i>Organisation</i>	O1	Practising routines
	O2	Putting in place procedures
	O3	Recognising pedagogy and links to practice
	O4	Placing events in sequence
<i>Connection</i>	C1	Making connections between one teaching situation and another
	C2	Interpreting, modifying, and altering plans to accommodate student needs
<i>Reflection</i>	R1	Making informed decisions based on reflection
	R2	Teaching responses are based on reflection

**Responses to the focus questions**

Each participant's focus question responses were read and key phrases and words in the responses were recorded for each of the questions. The analysis of the associate teachers' responses revealed that they could be grouped into themes for each of the questions. The responses from the associate teachers were collated and coded with the number of similar responses identified and tallied.



Initial attempts to locate particular words as identified by Dietz in the text of the associate teachers' journal responses were unsatisfactory. What did prove successful, however, was the identification of statements in the responses that illustrated the meaning more fully than the singular word/s identified by Dietz.

The focus questions revealed that the levels of professional learning by the associate teachers at the early stage of their internship were centred on exploration and organisation. Within the *Level of Exploration* forty percent of the associate teachers were inquiring about a specific focus such as learning about managing their classrooms. In their responses to the first focus question on their expectations of the internship sixty percent of the associate teachers indicated that they wanted to learn about school organisation, routines and administration. These areas of learning related to Dietz' level of organisation. Improved classroom confidence (50%), teaching skills and strategies (50%) were commented on by the associate teachers as the areas they hoped they would achieve

In the associate teachers' journal responses the level of learning related to *exploration* again indicated that fifty per cent of associate teachers wanted to know more about classroom management and managing the classroom without supervision and assistance of their teacher. The associate teachers (30%) also had

expectations that during their internship experiences they would learn more and explore further ideas about assessment procedures.

Their responses (70%) also indicated that they were 'learning the territory' as would be expected in the early stages of their internship. They were 'learning the territory' by investigating school organisation, class routines and procedures.

during their internship. The associate teachers indicated that they would know they had attained their outcomes through reflection (in the form of reflective journal and personal reflection (50%), through talking with their colleague teacher (50%) and through the responses they received from their students (40%).

From an analysis of the focus questions it became evident that there were some responses from the associate teachers that could not be analysed in terms of the Dietz framework. These responses were typically concerned with developing 'self' such as develop personally, comparing self to other teachers, observing feelings of self esteem, personal satisfaction and balancing personal and teaching life.

#### **Associate teacher journals**

Journal responses from each of the associate teachers were analysed by creating a general list of statements. These were collated and revealed the aspects of professional learning that occurred during the internship.

They indicated eagerness in their journal writing to learn more about these areas.

The associate teachers' level of learning related to *organisation* was also frequently written about in their journals. Their journal responses indicated that sixty per cent of them wanted to practise both the routines of the classroom and the wider school community. The associate teachers typically discussed learning routines related to teaching, daily planning, school organisation and functioning of the school. They were also putting into place procedures for the management of their classrooms (50%). So, not only were they exploring how these organisational matters were structured but also they wanted to learn how to implement these practices and procedures while at the same time remaining flexible (50%) in order to accommodate unplanned events. The

journal responses (60%) also indicated awareness that the organisation of lessons needed to provide motivating activities for students to engage them in their learning and understanding of the curriculum.

The associate teachers also discussed the *level of connection* in the specific reflective questions. All associate teachers indicated in their journal statements that they were aware of individual needs of students and they showed understandings through their reflections of the need to adapt their teaching practices to the needs of their students. The level of learning defined by Dietz as 'connection' saw the associate teachers move from the routinised aspect of learning to teach to their focus of making connections with the way they taught. They discussed in their journals the impact their teaching had on student learning and the outcomes achieved through their teaching. Journal responses also explained that the associate teachers were becoming more adept during their internship at catering for individual student differences by identifying appropriate teaching strategies for these students and modifying their teaching practices to best suit the needs of their students. An impressive progression was seen in this level of learning as associate teachers moved beyond the routinised procedures they had previously been focused on such as managing their classrooms to interpreting, modifying and altering plans to accommodate their individual student's learning needs.

The level of *reflection* was clearly evident in the associate teachers' journal responses. All of the associate teachers provided in depth responses to the questions they were asked to reflect upon during all stages of the internship. Their writings in their journal responses to the questions revealed their values about education and learning. In particular, the associate teachers wrote about their own learning and the learning of their students. The responses were open and honest and revealed much about their

inner feelings and thoughts and the beliefs they held about their teaching. Fifty per cent of the associate teachers reflected upon teaching events and examined ways to improve on their teaching to better meet student needs.

#### Shared group discussion

To provide informal data the author reflected on the group discussion after the meetings and identified general themes that had emerged from the questions that had been raised by both the colleague and associate teachers.

General themes that emerged from the shared group discussion included:

1. the collegial nature of teaching+ including the support provided by a mentor such as a colleague teacher;
2. the recognition that teaching is hard work and teachers must be organised to perform their daily tasks;
3. the associate teachers discussed a variety of ways they had reflected on their teaching practice during their internship. Their discussions confirmed that practices put in place as part of the internship such as discussion centred on their lesson evaluations with their colleague teacher, goal setting, reflection on their achievements and identification of areas for development were useful strategies that provided both a process and structure for their reflections and their learning and
4. the associate teachers indicated that they were now more familiar with school and classroom routines. They felt that this acquired knowledge would improve their self-confidence and hence would lead to greater confidence in the classroom. Many of the associate teachers indicated that they were more greatly aware of classroom and behaviour management strategies and they would implement these strategies from the beginning of their teaching with their class. They also expressed

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that they would feel more comfortable with developing their teaching programs and indicated that they felt they contributed to the team writing of teaching documents more effectively as a result of the experiences they had in the internship.

**Alignment of Data from the focus questions and specific reflective questions to Dietz' levels of learning.**

Data from Associate Teachers were combined in order to provide a summary of the number of responses from both the focus questions and the specific reflective questions in each of Dietz' levels of learning. Tallying each descriptor of learning in each of Dietz' four levels of learning provided a total summary of responses for each level of learning.

**Table 2**  
**Total responses according to level of learning**

Level	Code	Number of associate teacher focus question responses	Number of associate teacher responses to specific reflective questions	Combined responses from associate teachers	Total number of responses according to level of learning
Exploration	E1	1	6	7	Exploration (68 responses)
	E2	25	7	32	
	E3	0	7	3	
	E4	0	3	3	
	E5	5	8	13	
	E6	4	6	10	
Organisation	O1	6	12	18	Organisation (40 responses)
	O2	0	9	9	
	O3	5	7	12	
	O4	0	1	1	
Connection	C1	0	3	3	Connection (21 responses)
	C2	3	15	18	
Reflection	R1	5	9	14	Reflection (20 responses)
	R2	0	6	6	

Table 2 confirms the individual findings from each of the data sources. That is, overall the associate teachers were concerned with learning primarily in the level of exploration (68 responses). The level of organisation was also clearly an area of learning that was evident during the internship (40 responses). The associate teachers focused on the levels of connection (21 responses) and reflection (20 responses) after the initial learning of exploration and organisation had been acquired.

### Summary of the Findings

This study has revealed that reflection implemented through a variety of strategies can provide evidence of professional learning. A synthesis of each of the strategies used, that is, focus questions, specific reflective questions and journal responses and shared group discussion revealed that the associate teachers followed to some extent a pattern of learning during their internship.

Dietz's four levels of learning provided a useful scaffold for analysis for identifying the learning that was evident by the associate teachers during their internship. During the early stages of the internship the associate teachers' learning was focused on the levels Dietz described as exploration and organisation. Initially, the associate teachers were concerned about learning how to manage their classrooms. One of the greatest areas of concern for the associate teachers was to learn how to manage their classroom on their own without the presence of their colleague teacher. For many of the associate teachers managing a classroom and improving their classroom confidence was one of their greatest challenges. They were also keen to learn about school and classroom routines and procedures.

Once the routinised aspects such as administration, procedures and developing classroom management skills were

developed and learnt by the associate teachers their reflections revealed that their learning became more focused on their teaching and their students. The associate teachers became more adaptable in the ways they responded to interpreting and modifying their teaching plans and lessons to accommodate individual student needs. From the associate teachers reflections it was shown that they started to make connections between what and how they taught. More importantly, they began to see how their teaching impacted on their students' learning.

Reflection was seen as pivotal to the associate teachers' learning. Reflection was viewed as a strategy to assist them in raising their awareness of their learning. They felt that by talking to their colleague teacher and working collaboratively with them they would come to a fuller understanding of their learning, their students' learning and their teaching. By being able to identify and cater for individual student learning needs the associate teachers revealed in their journals that throughout the internship they were continually reflecting on their teaching practice and modifying their practice to achieve improved student outcomes.

There were descriptors identified by the associate teachers that did not align with the Dietz framework of learning. These descriptors as previously discussed were concerned with the associate teachers developing a sense of themselves as teachers. The associate teachers were concerned about their own feelings of personal satisfaction and self-esteem. This area of learning, identified by the associate teacher's, needs to be evident in any framework that describes professional learning.

### Conclusion

The reflective process makes learning more explicit by enabling associate teachers to take time to think about their experiences and their subsequent action based on these

experiences. This research has shown that associate teacher learning clearly benefits and is strengthened through reflection on practice. Associate teacher reflective skills in this internship were achieved through the implementation of a variety of reflective practices. Reflection enabled them to confront issues, look for solutions and solve problems and in doing so the associate teacher's knowledge and professional learning were enhanced. A deeper understanding of teaching practice was evident as a result of the associate teacher developing their reflective skills.

Specifically, this study has highlighted the need for teacher education programs to focus on student teacher learning in the field in specific areas such as concentrating on routinised procedures in the initial stages of teaching practice, management of classrooms and behaviour management techniques and at a later stage developing skills that cater for individual student needs.

The study has also highlighted the need to monitor student progress and learning in relation to the sequence that learning occurs, that is, from the routinised procedures to the more complex tasks and skills associated with teaching. For the internship program at the University of Western Sydney this study has emphasised the need to articulate and increase the associate teachers' and colleague teachers' awareness that learning is achieved in stages, as outlined in this paper.

As this and other research has shown, with appropriate support and the development of reflective practice beginning teachers can expand their understanding of critical reflection. The internship is one example of a different approach taken in teacher education to provide the additional support necessary for teachers as they make their transition from pre-service teacher to beginning teacher and that reflective journals and questions are indeed a strategy for professional learning.

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