

Cultivating Equitable Beliefs with Core Reflection

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Abstract

This was a submission for the third international Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference at Southern Oregon University, 2021: In a study of seven practicum students, I found that core reflection assisted them in surfacing internal obstacles that could be categorized as deficit-based or structural beliefs. Core reflection also seemed to aid participants in actualizing their core qualities in response to these obstacles. Questions explored in this paper include: “How can teacher educators facilitate equity literacy while simultaneously addressing the felt needs of preservice teachers?” and “How can core reflection assist in this process?” It is my hope that this paper may assist with the application and research of core reflection, while also providing new avenues in which to approach equity and holistic reflection.

Keywords: *core reflection, equity, teacher education*

Core reflection is a holistic approach that focuses on the tension between people’s inner strengths and their inner obstacles, as a way to support growth (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013). Previous research has found that core reflection may be used as a method for addressing uncertainty among student teachers (Browning, 2021). while simultaneously countering deficit discourse (Browning, 2017). James (2012) observed that deficit discourse exacerbates inequity, which in turn reproduces what Gorski (2017) calls deficit ideology. In this summary of a *Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference* roundtable discussion, I describe how core reflection has the potential to interrupt deficit ideology and substitute it with structural mindsets aimed toward fixing inequitable policies and practices.

During a study with preservice teachers I found that core reflection has the potential to facilitate a shift from deficit to structural ideology. The study looked at the ways in which preservice teachers experienced core reflection during their practicum experience. Practicum experience represents a fertile ground within which to facilitate structural thinking. Typically, it is a semester before preservice teachers begin their sixteen week student teaching internship. As Rozelle &

Wilson (2012) found, ideologies encountered during student teaching have a profound influence on preservice teachers. Therefore, educators would be remiss if they did not surface latent deficit ideologies and interrupt them before preservice teachers became firmly rooted in a student teaching context.

Seven practicum students agreed to participate in my study of core reflection. Two of these participants participated in fall 2019 and five others participated during spring 2020. Participants in the study agreed to three core reflection sessions and two interviews (one at the midpoint of their practicum experience and another at the end). While the fall cohort were able to follow this plan, the practicum experience of the spring cohort was interrupted by the Covid-19 global pandemic. Therefore, the spring cohort of five participants only conducted one core reflection session and one follow-up interview. I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed all core reflection sessions and interviews using critical qualitative methodology (Carspecken, 1996).

I validated findings with negative case analysis. Negative case analysis seeks out incidents in dialogic data that appear

to evoke similar phenomena but do not seem to be consistent with preliminary findings. A resolution of the inconsistency is achieved through comparison of the findings with interview data whereas a persistent inconsistency after analysis suggests new or separate findings (Carspecken, 1996).

As Table 1 shows (see below), analysis of inner obstacles (i.e., limiting beliefs) and core qualities suggested that four preservice teachers used core reflection to counter deficit views. For example, participant 4 claimed that their inner obstacle was their belief that “[my student] doesn’t want to be here [and] he doesn’t want to talk to me.” Core reflection helped them realize that they “want to use [my curiosity quality when I] sit down with him to see what he enjoys.”

Participant	Recognizing Deficit Views	Reflection on Deficit Views
1	“A student who might have a ‘I’m never going to use [what I learn in this class] attitude”	“I need to accept that not everyone is gonna love what I love”
2	“My cooperating teacher or my students won’t like me if I say the wrong thing.”	“I like these qualities [humor, bubbly, truthful] because they are who I am”
3	“If I use my qualities [patience, optimism, perseverance], they [students] won’t see me as a teacher – they will see me as a pushover”	“I’m trying to figure out how to get the tough part out when I panic and become uncertain” and “I want to focus on the core”
4	“[Student] doesn’t want to be here [and] he doesn’t want to talk to me”	“I want to [use my curiosity quality when I] sit down with him to see what he enjoys”

Table 1: Deficit Findings

Table 2 illustrates how three participants may have used core reflection to counter deficit thinking with structural thinking. Participant 7 exemplifies this shift when they reframe possible structural limitations centered on what practicum students are “allowed to say” when assisting a student who expresses suicidal ideation. Core reflection assisted them in clarifying the situation as being an opportunity to be as humane as possible (by using her core qualities of caring and courage).

Participant	Recognizing Structural Views	Reflection on Structural Views
5	“I don’t have the bandwidth to use my qualities effectively – I’m overwhelmed with everything going on in my life right now”	“I need to exercise qualities [e.g., compassion and creativity] on myself so I can deal with the bandwidth issue”
6	“Am I stepping on my cooperating teacher’s toes if I say something to this student?”	“Now that I’ve processed it, I understand it better: the teacher procedure vs. the human procedure [caring, courage]”
7	“The box of known expectations: ‘I can’t deviate from this or else what will my cooperating teacher think?’”	“It sounds silly to say this [obstacle] out loud” and “Can I have a do over [with my lesson]?”

Table 2: Structural Findings

Part of what makes core reflection attractive to holistic educators is its emphasis on “the elevator” – the thinking, feeling, and wanting layers of reflection (see Figure 1 below). Both the coach and participant are expected to express their thoughts, emotions, and motivations throughout the session. As a core reflection coach in each case, I found myself *wanting* to push for structural change rather than settling for the countering of a single instance of deficit thinking. I believe the conflict between my desire and what I actually did during coaching may reveal my own *limiting belief*, which is that core reflection must always center the experiences of a participant. As Dubose (2020) has argued, the assumption that “answers to inequity [always] lie within a [teacher] ... maintains existing structures of power and privilege” (p. 1). Therefore, scholars such as Gorki & Dalton (2019) call for a “deeper and more sophisticated social justice learning through critical reflection” (p. 10), which can be initiated with prompts to “reflect on the areas of continued growth one needs [in order] to be an agent of social justice change” (p. 7).

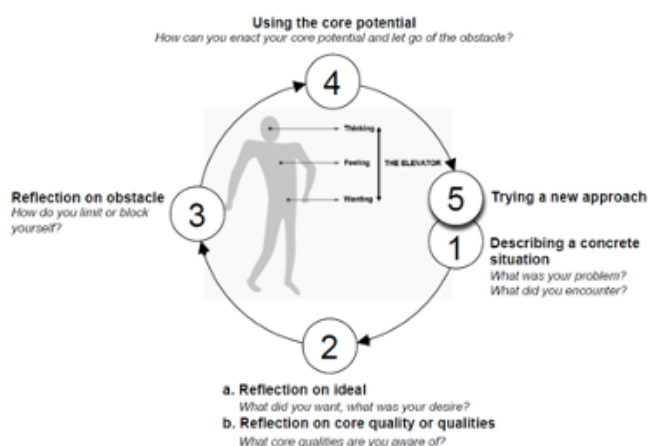


Figure 1: The Steps of Core Reflection (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005)

I now believe core reflection can be flexible enough in its application to allow for prompts aimed at structural change. Perhaps one approach may involve filming a core reflection session and using the video in what is called Interpersonal Process Recall (Kagan 1980, 1984). Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) uses video to assist participants in reflecting upon a previously filmed experience, in this case core reflection. IPR could allow participants to reflect on ways in which they could transform the conditions that cause the deficit discourse described in their video of core reflection. A second core reflection session could ensue after the tools and takeaways from IPR are surfaced and acknowledged. While this method of IPR “sandwiched” around two core reflection sessions needs to be implemented and studied, I nonetheless believe this approach could allow core reflection to be more intentional in its cultivation of a structural impulse.

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