5 Life-History Accounts as Mirrors: A Practical Avenue for the Conceptualization of Reflection in Teacher Education

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Life-history research is rich and arresting. Indeed, life histories as told to researchers have provided backbones to some of the more illuminating and persuasive anthropological and sociological research of this century (see e.g. Bertaux, 1981; Denzin, 1989; Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985; Wiley, 1986). Life-history accounts have illuminated aspects of particular cultures—even whole cultures—in significant ways (see e.g. Dyk, 1938; Freeman, 1979; Radin, 1926; Shostak, 1981; Simmons, 1942; Shaw, 1966), including the cultures of education, schools, and teachers (see e.g. Becker, 1952; Beynon, 1985; Goodson, 1981, 1983). They are, therefore, not completely foreign to the examination of pertinent professional and personal issues in education and, as such, have been used with particular success in examining aspects of teaching practices, curriculum, and school histories (see e.g. Ball and Goodson, 1985; Beynon, 1985; Goodson, 1991; Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Smith, Dwyer, Prunty and Kleine, 1988; Woods, 1984).

Life histories are also illuminating windows on the processes of reflection that prospective teachers have utilized throughout their long experience of being students. As personal constructs, life histories access the impact of these experiences on the thinking of teachers in preparation. In this chapter I explore the usefulness of personal histories as a kind of mirror through which both preservice teachers and teacher educators can view the origins of preservice teachers’ personal perspectives about teaching, classrooms, schools and education. It draws on a small body of work which explores preservice teachers’ perspectives within the context of their life histories. Further, considering my own professional experiences associated with creating, sharing and analyzing personal histories in preservice teacher education, I suggest that personal history accounts, coupled with extended conversations about the substance of those accounts, provides one avenue for conceptualizing and implementing...
reflective inquiry in preservice teacher education. In the process I define life histories and life-history accounts in teacher education, explore the tasks associated with constructing and examining life-history accounts, and relate the elements of life-history accounts to the process of reflective inquiry. All this underscores my advocacy for developing refined reflexive practice in prospective teachers which, in a sense, implies a refining of the reflexive practices that such individuals have engaged in the assessment of their own experiences as students.

Defining Life History: Applications and Functions in Research

My research preparation is steeped in the orientations and methods of anthropology and sociology, and it is from these perspectives that I first explored the potential of life histories as a means of finding answers to and meanings from the particular research questions that I asked in my work. For example, I especially found informant-constructed life-history accounts invaluable for exploring home education—where parents take on the responsibility of educating their children at home (see e.g. Knowles, 1989b, 1991a). I also found life-history accounts helpful for exploring the relationships between life experiences associated with the long period of ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975)—experiences of learning and observing classrooms and teachers in schools—and the practices of beginning teachers (see e.g. Knowles, 1992, 1989a; Knowles and Hoefler, 1989; Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

To extend the use of the life-history method beyond the purposes of research to formal teacher preparation was a natural progression in my thinking, given my preservice teacher education responsibilities (see Knowles, 1991b), and my research interest in the early period of teacher development and socialization. Others, such as Goodson and Cole (1991), and Sikes and Aspinwall (1990), have also found life histories particularly productive in this area of study. My knowledge and use of the method as a research tool greatly influenced my pedagogy (Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991) and, as a result, I developed an appropriate definition of life histories and, eventually, a schemata for the use of the life-history method in preservice teacher education classes that I taught.

A Definition

Life history accounts are one distinctive form of personal documents, like autobiographies, diaries and journals, and artistic expressions such as novels and poetry, and painting and sculpture:

Personal documents as a generic category include any expressive production of the individual that can be used to throw light on
his view of himself, his life situation, or the state of the world as he understands it, at some particular point in time or over the passage of time (Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985, p. 2).

As a category of personal documents, life histories are distinguished by the motivations associated with the recording of the life: ‘As we see it the “life history” is any retrospective account by the individual of his life in whole or in part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person’ (Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985, p. 2). In other words, life-history accounts, whether in written or spoken form, are constructed at the request of someone other than the person the life history describes. This definition undergirds the use of life-history accounts as I describe them in the remainder of this chapter. Also, I use the terms ‘life history’ and ‘personal history’ interchangeably.

**Applications**

There are, as is to be expected within the disparate applications of anthropology and sociology, various interpretive modes applied to and associated with life-history research (see e.g. Denzin, 1989; Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985). But, for the purposes of using life-history accounts in teacher preparation programs, the meanings attributed to prior experiences are those assigned by the ‘story tellers’ or writers themselves—preservice teachers. In that vein, the interpretations are akin to phenomenological explorations of the subjective experience (Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985; see also Van Manen, 1989). Emerging from those self-interpretations, in tandem with engaging dialogues about teaching with more experienced individuals, is the extension and development of productive schema for working with students within school classrooms. In this way, preservice teachers extend the boundaries of their personal knowledge in furthering their own professional development.

**Functions**

With respect to the value of the life-history research method for enlightening understandings of education, Beynon (1985), drawing on the work of Faraday and Plummer (1979), Bogdan and Taylor (1970), Dollard (1949), and Becker (1966), succinctly notes three functions, each of which are beneficial in the present context—that of using life-history accounts in preservice teacher education. The first is a subjective function:

The life history method is uniquely placed to grapple with the individual’s subjective reality, assumptions and beliefs. It emphasizes
the interpretations people place on their everyday experiences as an explanation of behavior (Beynon, 1985, p. 164).

The second function is a contextual one. The life history locates an individual’s life within a greater sphere: ‘[It] grounds the individual life in both the context of the lived experience as well as within the broader social and economic system in which s/he lives’ (p. 164). Third, life histories have an evaluative function: The life history method reasserts the complexities of lived experience and alerts researchers to issues of which there is, as yet, a poor conceptualization.’ (p. 165). In part, I interpret the evaluative function as implying the usefulness of life histories for exploring issues for which there are limited knowledge bases. While this function serves my research admirably, it also serves prospective teachers—and teacher educators—by drawing attention to the origins and conceptualizations of prospective teachers’ thinking about working in classrooms.

The Nature, Substance and Usefulness of Life-History Accounts in Teacher Education

In developing a conceptualization of reflection in teacher education based on the examination of the nature and substance of life-history accounts that preservice teachers write, there are several elements which build upon the functions of the life-history method. I wish to lay these out in some detail; they form the infrastructure of my proposition. First, whether or not we (as teacher educators) recognize and acknowledge it, all prospective teachers possess rich, illuminating, intensely interesting personal histories; lives are full of interesting experiences, even though some individuals may claim the contrary for their lives and the lives of others. Second, although the process of writing ongoing personal histories is of itself useful, it is an activity which can sometimes be very difficult, perplexing and enervating. This is particularly so when writers confront elements of their prior experiences which are contradictory to elements of their present lives, career directions, or the philosophical orientations of teacher education programs and school placements within which they are immersed. Third, personal histories—not including chronologies of events—are, of the most part, private mental constructs unless they can be shared with other, trusted people in some form and, in this regard, a written format is useful. Thus, in the context of pre-service teacher education, the process and product of writing, sharing, and elaborating the elements of one’s personal history reflect or mirror the beliefs, actions, practices, skills and thinking which preservice teachers bring with them to formal preparation programs. For this reason, especially, the process has value for professional development.
Rich and Intensely Interesting

People lead interesting lives. And, they usually enjoy telling stories about critical, memorable instances of their lives around dinner tables, at social events, in times of nostalgia, on occasions which celebrate life—and death—and, indeed, at any time when other people will listen or are a captive audience. Hospital and physicians’ waiting rooms, carriages in railway trains, saloons in hotels and ocean liners, bars in local pubs, places where strangers are brought together, places where people are united in some commonly-experienced event or circumstance—by chance or intent—are all places where elements of personal histories are told and retold. In the process of telling their life stories, individuals raise their consciousness about the substance and meanings of life circumstances and events (see e.g. Meyerhoff, 1982).

Usually, listeners are passive—as in the story teller’s captive audience in the carriage booth on a moving train or the unsuspecting traveller in the shared seat on a long intercontinental bus journey. Often, on occasions of passive listening, stories are found wanting of substance, sequence, linkages, logic, convergence or consequence—and, in most cases, listeners do not question the integrity of stories. Less often, listeners actively seek to resolve anomalies and obtain clarification of points made by the story teller. On such occasions, questions of story tellers often help make life stories more coherent, more internally consistent. But always, whether stories hang together or not, they are usually more intensely interesting as a result of calls for clarification.

Stories that are internally consistent or focused are particularly arresting, especially if they tell elements of life histories that witness challenges and confrontations, changes and consequences, convergence and contradiction in contexts and conditions which represent the commonplace. Schools are commonplaces, environments that have and represent shared meanings for most people—unless, of course, you happen to have been home-educated by your parents. As such, stories about schools and classrooms, teachers and fellow pupils, form the basis of many elements of most preservice teachers’ thinking about the professional practice of teaching— and of experienced teachers’ practice (see e.g. Witherell and Noddings, 1991).

For young first-career preservice teachers, school experiences are often relatively vivid in their memories—after all, they are very recent. While older, second-career teachers in preparation may have less clear recollections of their own elementary and secondary school experiences, they, like their younger counterparts, may also draw from their experiences of schools, classrooms, and teachers as parents. And, as Pillemer, Goldsmith, Panter and White (1988), Pillemer (1984), and White (1982) point out, when long-past experiences were difficult or troublesome, individuals’ recollections may not always be reliable. Nevertheless, individuals draw meaning from those recollections whether or not they are accurate in detail or spirit.
Writing life history accounts is often a difficult and exhausting task as writers recount, interconnect and make meaning of their past experiences. For some individuals, life histories often contain stories within stories, accounts that people sometimes prefer to forget or to place in the unreachable recesses of their minds. As such, some events are not always readily visible or accessible in normal conversation and may require a trigger for release. These less memorable topics are, however, often important sources for understanding the schemas through which the world is viewed.

For example, as I tried on various roles as a young beginning teacher there were certain cloaks of practice that did not match the rest of my attire—they did not jibe with the kinds of experiences I knew to be most valuable to me as a student—and I tended to dismiss them as being not appropriate for the wardrobe of my teaching repertoire. Why? On deeper examination, in some cases, the particular practices in question were connected to approaches or experiences with which or through which I had suffered (such as at the hands of an unethical teacher) or which were associated with punishment or near failure. In other cases, the practices did not resonate with me because of idiosyncratic perspectives or particular persons or circumstances that I associated with the specific practice. I simply did not like the practice or the student-required skills and activities that were associated with it. These kinds of dichotomies and dilemmas in one’s thinking in the early stages of professional development are often difficult to identify, address and write about in life-history accounts. On one hand a professor or classroom professional may have sworn by the usefulness of an approach while on the other hand I instantly rejected its usefulness, and explorations of my reasoning provided important insights into myself and the nature of my experiences.

Over the course of half-a-dozen years in which I have asked preservice teachers to explore their personal histories in written form, there have been a few individuals who have vehemently objected to the task. These objections were not necessarily because they saw the task as intrusive or time-consuming. Neither were the objections simply because the individuals experienced blocks in their attempts to write—although they probably did. Typically, and in private, these prospective teachers confided that their objections to writing were either grounded in events to which they attribute meanings contradictory to the direction of their current thinking or they were meanings that engendered painful and difficult experiences associated with learning and schools. In the first case they typically attributed meanings to events or circumstances which revealed massive internal inconsistencies in their thinking about teaching, classrooms, schools, and education, and about their very presence in programs of preservice teacher education within schools of education.

The preservice teachers’ objections, then, were embedded in elements of
their life histories that they recognized needed to be openly confronted and dealt with head on; but, they were very reluctant to do so. The polemical experience of writing life-history accounts seemed to offer nothing but pain. Translating intent into action is difficult indeed for some individuals under these kinds of circumstances.

Several individuals come to mind as providing illustrations of the confrontational aspects of writing life histories. One such person was Kathryn (a pseudonym) who, taking one of my courses, was particularly resistant to writing her life-history account. Kathryn was a young, idealistic, prospective teacher and a self-declared social reconstructivist long before she entered formal teacher education. She was an able writer, an English major with a particular flair for using innovative and student-centered approaches in the classroom, and a very proficient preservice teacher. She was well able to argue pedagogical theories and integrate them into her practice. She was purposeful and diligent about her preparation to become a new teacher; yet, she found it extremely difficult to write her life-history account and kept delaying its completion and presentation to me.

What made the writing of Kathryn’s personal history particularly difficult was, she said: ‘the finality of putting my thoughts down on paper.’ She was referring to her delay in resolving the dilemmas posed by her contradictory experiences of schools, of teachers, and of learning. In effect she had not, until that particular point in time, tried to resolve some longstanding contradictory issues present in her thinking about public schools and their worth, and she intuitively knew that in the act of writing she would reveal those contradictions and inconsistencies in her own thinking about teaching. On the one hand, she had been exposed to ‘fairly ordinary, dull teaching’ by individuals who ‘were themselves dull, boring and totally uncreative.’ These individuals represented her summary impression of most teachers. In contrast, on the other hand, she learned a great deal about creativity, societal concerns and teachers’ work from a singularly ‘outstanding teacher’, a woman who ‘went to great pains to inspire a working-class, ordinary kid, to greater heights.’ And this person was a kind of role model, some-what a representation of her image of self as teacher (see Knowles, 1992).

To make things more confusing, Kathryn’s working-class background and neighborhood, and elementary school experiences, did not prepare her for attending junior and high schools with students from middle- and uppermiddle-class families. The resulting experience was one of isolation, loneliness, frustration, pain and ostracization. She resorted to ‘fostering solid relationships with a few adults’ who not only ‘spoke [her] language and understood [her]’ but also provided stimulating discussions and exhibited enthusiastic learning about many contrasting aspects of the local community. These, indeed, were confusing experiences and, as a result, the prospect of writing about herself within a framework connected to the heart of her thinking about education loomed ominously overhead.
Kathryn had delayed dealing with the contrasting experiences in other than ‘the relatively superficial ways that [she] had made meaning from [them] as a younger adult.’ As a result, she was totally ambivalent about the value of public schools, their place in contemporary communities, and their value for providing equal opportunities and creative experiences. These unresolved philosophical and intellectual issues were at the heart of her resistance to writing her life history.

Kathryn’s case illustrates some of the difficulties and kinds of internal contradictions that constrain writers. Yet, for those who manage to overcome these kinds of internal constraints (as Kathryn eventually did when she was freed of the boundaries and expectations established by the activity as an impending course requirement), writing life histories and subsequently sharing them can be particularly illuminating and beneficial for those involved. In Kathryn’s parting words, after she had completed the onerous task:

Writing my autobiography [meaning life history] was particularly difficult. It was hell! After putting it off for so long [— some six months—] it felt particularly good to lay out in the open the issues that had bothered me for so long. Not only that, but I was able to reexamine the constructs of my positions and some of them—really quite a few—were ill-founded or based on incomplete information and limited experiences.

Expressions of Private Mental Constructs

As Kathryn illustrated in her own words, she not only thought of her life-history account as ‘a window on my thinking about being a teacher’ but as a ‘revelation of who I am,…of the [teaching] methods that I hold close to my heart, and of the ones that I detest in teachers’ [practice].’ Likewise, Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) and others such as Allport (1942), Becker (1966), Denzin (1989), and Langness and Frank (1981), argue that a central value and usefulness of life histories, in the context of research activities, is that they lay bare the thinking of the narrator or writer.

Life-history accounts offer a vehicle for gaining insights into private mental constructs. The process yields useful information for both writers and readers. Because of their form, life-history accounts offer a degree of convenience for readers—as observers or instructors in the context of preservice teacher education—to understand those with whom they work. Simultaneously, the act of writing personal accounts induces preservice teachers to be careful and cognizant in the act of revealing their thinking —since written accounts demand high levels of internal consistency and clarification because of the typical expectations associated with university papers and assignments. But, in the act of writing life-history accounts, perspectives and circumstances are
frozen in time. This presents limitations to the scope of mental constructs revealed since writers have control over the windows through which they allow others to view. As such, while the thinking is laid bare, it may only represent partial perspectives. There is a need, therefore, to go beyond the initial explication, to further examine and extend the articulated constructs. Dialogue journals (to be discussed later) provide one vehicle for construction clarification.

What are some of the mental constructs that are viewed? Personal histories, whether in written or spoken form, reveal the internal dialogues about teaching and schools that preservice teachers use. These dialogues are the result of mostly long-held beliefs about teaching and working in classrooms, a product of a long apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975). When thinking about teaching practices and classroom teaching, preservice teachers tend to access their own experiences, and on the basis of their assessment of worth accept or reject them. They do this by conducting mental discussions about such practices by trying them out on various real and imaginary students and themselves as students. Questions such as ‘How would I react to this practice?’ or ‘What would my friend have done in this circumstance?’ precipitate a mental discussion or dialogue with that real or imagined person about the value of the teaching method. Within these dialogues are practical arguments about theory and practice relevant to working with students in classrooms and schools. These represent the substance of the internal dialogues that are the very basis for accepting or rejecting a particular practice as being suitable for them. For example, rejection of a particular strategy for maintaining classroom order may simply be ‘One of my teachers used to use this method and I hated it because...therefore I refuse to use it.’ Or,...‘This is a useful way of teaching...because it allows kids to take charge and that’s what I appreciated as a learner.’ A more detailed account of internal dialogues and practical arguments as I use the concept is found in Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991 (see also Holt-Reynolds, 1990; Knowles, 1990).

Unless teacher educators take special efforts to converse extensively with preservice teachers, a very difficult task when confronted with teaching and facilitating the development of large numbers of them, the private mental constructs of preservice teachers are likely to remain largely that—private, hidden, or camouflaged. As a result, the potential of such examination for informing practice is left unrealized.

Further, the life-history accounts illustrate a kind of reflection in operation. The mental constructs—the internal dialogues and practical arguments—are evidence of considerable analyses of teachers, teaching, classrooms and schools since they record the impacts of long associations with schools. Moreover, the subsequent explorations of those experiences by the writers themselves represent elements of a more refined, systematic reflective inquiry and these activities also present many opportunities for professional development.
Developing the Substance of Conversations:
The Task of Constructing Life-History Accounts

The implicit task of asking preservice teachers to construct life-history accounts is to develop a basis for a continued conversation—making the implicit explicit—about the nature and substance of their thinking (Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991). To encourage prospective teachers in the writing of their personal history accounts I use a combination of approaches. For example, I attempt to: 1) develop open, safe, and respectful learning environments within small peer groups; 2) accept and openly acknowledge personal experiences as valuable for informing theories and practices of teaching; 3) acknowledge and model the value of discussing shared experiences of classrooms and schools; 4) share accounts of my life history—or elements of it—in written and oral forms (see Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991); 5) extensively discuss the nature, substance, and value of constructing life-history accounts; 6) acknowledge the difficulty of writing and provide alternative structures, topics or questions for hesitant writers; and, 7) expect the assignment to be completed in almost any way that promotes the growth of individuals’ professional knowledge and skills, and their satisfaction with the completed account and process.

In the context of courses I teach, the life-history assignments are usually fashioned by providing preservice teachers with a written statement about the value and usefulness of exploring elements of their life histories, followed by a list of topics and questions that are designed to promote responses and thinking about the substance of prior experiences. The life histories are not intended to be chronological accounts of events—although they may include such—but, rather, are insightful examinations of their efforts to become teachers within the contexts of their educational lives. Potentially useful topics include: decisions to become a teacher; teachers’ work; visions of teachers and teaching; outstanding teachers and their influence; metaphors for teaching and working with students in classrooms; learning styles and opportunities; conflicts about the nature of schools and their organization; doubts about self-as-teacher; the influence of class, race, society, location on educational experiences; and, relations with teachers, students and persons of handicap.

In summary, as stated in one of the course outlines requiring written life-history accounts:

A purposeful and forthright life history/personal history will address personal and formative experiences relating to learning, education and schools, besides acknowledging biases and the impact of negative role models, negative attitudes and stereotypical viewpoints. Philosophical positions about education in general, discipline, classroom management, curriculum orientations, extracurricular activities and other aspects of learning and teaching, probably ought to be addressed (Knowles, 1989c, p. 9).
Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) suggest there are important considerations when gathering and analyzing life-history data. Researchers, they maintain, want to know the answers to many questions about the methods used to gather life histories. Some of these questions explore the relationship between the reader/researcher and the writer, the circumstances in which the writer composed the life history, the incentives and motivations to write, the writer’s response to the task of compiling the account, and the particular kinds of questions used to elicit the writing. These considerations illuminate several issues that are essential for facilitating the professional development of preservice teachers.

The intent of such questions asked of researchers foreshadows the concerns usefully kept in the forefront of my thinking as I develop and maintain productive relationships with individuals who reveal their innermost feelings, including their fears, frustrations and fantasies, about the connections between their past experiences of schools, classrooms and teachers and their prospective professional lives: 1) the trustworthiness of the reader of life histories must be assured and open communication must be sought; 2) while there is clearly a hierarchical relationship between prospective teachers and their teacher, that differential must be minimized; 3) while incentives and motivations for writing may be external and, as a result, induce the written account to be cast in particular molds, the most productive life-history accounts are developed when writers are intrinsically motivated and take advantage of the opportunity to make meaning of their prior education-related experiences; 4) some students of teaching will require considerable urging to complete the task while others will tackle it without question; and, 5) the kinds of structures provided for developing the organization and substance of the written account profoundly affect the final product, as do the particular kinds of questions and topics suggested.

Responding to Life-History Accounts: Continuing the Conversation through Dialogue Journal Writing

Insights gained from writing a personal history account provide starting points for further and deeper examination. The dialogue journal offers one vehicle and forum for entering and continuing the conversation begun in the life-history account. The use of dialogue journals in preservice teacher education, in association with constructed and shared life-history accounts, I maintain, promotes elements of reflection (see Knowles, 1991b; Martin, 1991)—although this is a point we need to be cautious about—and the development of new perspectives (Bolin, 1988; see also Staton, 1987). A dialogue in journal format, as opposed to a face-to-face interaction, enhances the opportunities for critically reviewing the origins of a teacher’s thinking. By critically reviewing I mean, in Apple’s (1975) terms, ‘radically reexamining…current positions and asking potential questions about the
relationship that exists between these positions and the social structures from which they arise’ (p. 127). Through the reflexive practices of writing and dialogue both the thinking and the contexts in which the constructs were developed are laid bare.

There are three main rationales for using dialogue journals. First, there are strengths in teacher educators and preservice teachers developing close working relationships and this occurs when each are immersed in the other’s development and learnings. Mentorship is both a powerful role-modelling technique and a more direct way to share new and established understandings of classrooms and schools (e.g. see Bey and Holmes, 1990; Shulman and Colbert, 1987). When learners and teachers are in synchronous relationships—when they begin to have shared understandings about the world of teaching, and subsequently develop common goals and inquiries— the potential to influence each other is heightened (see e.g. Bullough and Gitlin, 1989; Witherell and Makler, 1989).

Second, intensive dialogical interactions serve an assessment function. The weaknesses and strengths of prospective teachers may more readily come to the fore, enabling purposeful individualized attention to experienced difficulties (see Bullough and Gitlin, 1989). Commentaries by writers who trust readers are likely to portray difficult events and problems, important for avoiding ‘mis-educative experiences’ (Dewey, 1938). This element of dialogue journal writing presents a formative evaluation strategy that is particularly useful during field placements and practice/student teaching, when there are limited opportunities for face-to-face contact.

Third, professors of teacher education, like the preservice teachers under their tutelage, have their own scripts, or internal dialogues, about learning to teach and working in classrooms (Knowles, 1990; Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991). These separate narratives, the instructor’s and the preservice teachers’, seldom meeting with synergetic force. Dialogue journal writing has qualities which show great promise and potential to significantly aid in productive exchanges and understandings of their separate scripts (Knowles, 1990).

In other places (see Knowles, 1991b, 1990; Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991) I have made explicit other purposes and arguments for the use of dialogue journals. For example, helping preservice teachers make their implicit beliefs about teaching known is of central importance, as is the very act of listening to their internal narratives.

Considerable emotional investment and time commitment are necessary, however, if one is to become intensely involved in responding to dialogue journal writing in a manner that proves satisfying for both the reader and writer. When both reader and writer gain in knowledge and understanding from the experience, transformational power is offered to both individuals (see Bullough and Gitlin, 1989; Witherell and Makler, 1989). One key to achieving this is limiting the numbers of preservice teachers for which a professor, or other co-instructors, are responsible—groups of less than
ten may be the most productive number for mentors/journal readers to handle.

Thus, a combination of writing life-history accounts and dialogue journal writing has been most productive in my teaching. Both vehicles tend to provide many opportunities for reflection, in Kathryn’s words: ‘to test the waters (and their source)...of our beliefs and thinking about teaching, putting everything in a more constructive framework.’ In that way writing life-history accounts and conversing in dialogue journals helps set the scene for reflective practice opportunities—indeed they represent elements of reflective practice in both the past and the present.

**Life-Histon Accounts as Mirrors:**
**Towards Conceptualizing Reflection**

By drawing on the work of others, in this brief section I discuss aspects of the notion of reflection—I use the term reflexive inquiry and reflexive practices synonymously. First I briefly explore the value and purpose of reflection. Second, I suggest some definitional elements of reflection and, third, I outline some basic assumptions about reflection. Fourth, I discuss some of the orientations and characteristics of reflection which lead almost full circle into, fifth, the place of reflexive inquiry in teacher education.

**Value and Purpose**

In thinking about reflection within the context of preservice teacher education, a fundamental question needs to be answered: Why is it useful and important for teachers to engage in reflection? Because schools and society are constantly changing, the argument is often made that teachers need to be reflective in order to cope effectively with changing circumstances (Schön, 1983). Further, teacher education programs can rarely prepare teachers to be effective in all kinds of classroom situations (Grant and Zeichner, 1984), and teachers need ways to familiarize themselves with ways of acting that induces ongoing professional development and renewal. Given that the pedagogical knowledge base in teacher education has been criticized as being inconsistent and unorganized, and that field experiences in classrooms—including student/practice teaching—are seen as replicating the status quo: ‘reflection is valued because it interrupts the smooth flow of events’ (Floden and Buchmann, 1990, p. 53). It effectively challenges the thinking about events, circumstances, and philosophies which constitute and value the status quo.

Reflection, to extend its purpose further, is seen as a means of emancipation and empowerment, a vehicle for allowing both teacher educators and teachers to take control of environments and circumstances
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in which they work and students learn (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Noffke and Brennan, 1988; Wildman and Niles, 1987). While a radical critique of schooling emphasizes the school’s role in preserving social inequities, the progressive social vision puts faith in the power of education to shape a new social order that truly plays out the democratic role of schooling. Reflection is seen as one way of re-socialization, which is deemed necessary: ‘especially if new ways of teaching are to be fostered’ (Feiman-Nemser, 1990, p. 227).

There is a strong sense of morality associated with the reflective teacher (e.g. Liston and Zeichner, 1987). It is assumed that acts of reflection will lead to ‘moral’, ‘correct’, and ‘ethical’ choices; however, when Dewey (1933) defined reflective action ‘as behavior which involves active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads’ (Grant and Zeichner, 1984, p. 4) he believed that the attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness were prerequisites for suitable reflective action (see also Chapter 2). Open-mindedness refers to attention to all the possible alternatives, responsibility involves the careful consideration of the consequences to which an action leads, and wholeheartedness refers to the fact that open-mindedness and responsibility are central in the life of the reflective teacher (Grant and Zeichner, 1984).

Reflection Defined

While there are varied definitions of reflection (see e.g. Dewey, 1933; Grimmet and Erickson, 1988; Schön, 1983, 1987; Van Manen, 1977) and as many orientations towards reflective practice—for example, personal, technical, practical and critical (Weiss and Louden, 1989)—the underlying theme running through these definitions is that reflection is an intra-personal process (Canning, 1990) through which personal and professional knowing can occur (Sikes and Aspinwall, 1990). Reflection is seen as a process and method of informing practice with reason (Liston and Zeichner, 1987; Schön, 1988; Witherell and Makler, 1989). Reflection is not seen as being static; implicit in its meaning is action (Schön, 1983; Noffke and Brennan, 1988). It is seen as a vehicle for promoting changed behaviors and practices (Boyd and Fales, 1983), and a means of improving foresight (Buchmann, 1990; Schön, 1983), lessening the chances of taking inappropriate lines of action.

Basic Assumptions

There are some basic assumptions associated with reflexive inquiry. The first assumption is that reflection does lead to better action (Noffke and Brennan, 1988; Schön, 1983); another, is that it is necessary to reflect in order to be an effective teacher (Grant and Zeichner, 1984). The opposing view suggests
that effective teachers act primarily on intuition, spontaneously rather than reflectively. Grant and Zeichner (1984) suggest, however, that teachers who are described as effective may act spontaneously and intuitively but reflect prior to and after their actions. To reflect during action is more difficult. These views mirror Schön’s (1983) position.

Another assumption underlying the concept of reflection is that multiple ways of seeing persist during the teaching act (Valli and Taylor, 1989). This assumption holds true when viewed from Dewey’s (1933) perspective, given the implicit link between reflection and action through reflective teaching. For Dewey, reflection is a practical activity embedded in the act of teaching (Noffke and Brennan, 1988). Writing journals and other autobiographical texts, doing action-research, debriefing after practice, and peer/supervisor support groups have increasingly been advocated as ways in which reflection can be facilitated (e.g. Butt, Raymond and Yamagishi, 1988; Charvoz, Crow and Knowles, 1988; Cooper, 1989; Gore and Zeichner, 1990; Knowles, 1991b; Martin, 1991; Yinger and Clark, 1981).

Orientations and Characteristics

Reflection is conceptualized through varied orientations and hierarchies of teacher education programs (e.g. Boyd and Fales, 1983; Canning, 1990; Kemmis, 1985; Noffke and Brennan, 1988; Schön, 1988). Some of the more common orientations include the technological, practical/problematic, personal and critical (see also Chapter 1). These different frameworks presume different interests (Weiss and Louden, 1989). Technological reflection considers choices centered on economy, efficiency and effectiveness of working in classrooms. Practical/problematic reflection is concerned with the ‘resolution of problems in action’ which occur within the regular contexts of teaching, yet defy easy, routine solutions. Personal reflection considers the interpretations of personal meanings, assumptions and judgments when making decisions. Critical reflection considers the political, ethical and social contexts questioning the taken-for-granted conceptions of teachers’ work, and the striving towards construction of educational communities based on democratic ideals (see van Manen, 1987; Noffke and Brennan, 1988).

Hierarchically, critical reflection is predominantly viewed as a higher level of thinking than technological, personal and practical/problematic reflection (e.g. van Manen, 1977). Biermann, Mintz and McCullough (1988) identify three hierarchical levels of reflection among students of teaching. The first level is likened to the metaphor of production where teachers are technologically capable. They possess basic teaching skills and the technical ability to convey knowledge; however, they tend to perpetuate the models of teaching they have experienced and are primarily concerned with outcomes of instruction rather than processes. The second level of reflection is the decision-making level and is likened to the
metaphor of choice. Teachers at this level possess and use first-level skills but also practice appropriate, consistent and defensible instructional decision-making. They emphasize problem-solving and critical thinking, make thoughtful choices, assess the various consequences of instruction, show commitment to continued personal growth, and are tolerant of individual differences in students. The metaphor of liberation is used with the third level of reflection. A teacher at this level strives to continue a program of self-directed growth, applies moral and ethical criteria to educational decisions, assumes personal responsibility, provides leadership, resolves inconsistencies between beliefs, values and behaviours through reflection, and experiments and takes risks.

Noffke and Brennan (1988) caution against hierarchical models of thinking about reflection and view reflection as a relational process, not a linear one. They conceptualize an alternative model in which reflection is a ‘dynamic, multi-dimensional, and social activity’ (p. 24). Their model is built on dimensions, not hierarchies and layers. There is no ‘more is better’ reflection, but all dimensions are important for the process. One plane of the figure, the sensory dimension, is occupied by the actors in the social world— their material reality, skills and actions. The second dimension consists of ideals which connote a reference to moral and ethical principles such as caring, justice and equality. The historical dimension looks at how educational practices evolved and came to be developed. The ‘determinants’ dimension of the model depicts the structures of the cultural, political and economic spheres as they intersect with class, gender and race dynamics.

Schön (1988) conceptualized reflective teaching as ‘giving reason’. For Schön, reflection is comprised of ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’. Reflection-in-action is ‘reflection on phenomena, and on one’s spontaneous ways of thinking and acting, undertaken in the midst of action to guide further action’ (Schön, 1988, p. 22); reflection-on-action consists of reflection after the event, and reflection on reflection-in-action. Shulman (1988) cautions against viewing reflection in the form of dichotomies because the teaching world does not divide readily into extreme groups. Also cautioned is the view that ‘school knowledge or technical rationality “leave no room” for certain more reflective, artistic or responsive processes’ (Shulman, 1988, p. 33). It is important to combine the technical and the reflective, the theoretical and the practical, and the universal and the concrete. Shulman maintains that while it is important to ‘give reason’, it is also important to ‘marry’ those reasons to what is reasonable (see also Chapter 2).

The personal orientation is conceptualized by Boyd and Fales (1983). They define reflection as ‘the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world) where the outcome is a changed conceptual perspective’ (p. 101). They describe reflection as composed of six stages: 1) a sense of inner discomfort; 2) identification or clarification of the concern; 3) openness to new information from internal and external sources, with the ability to observe
and take in a variety of perspectives; 4) resolution, expressed as ‘integration’, ‘coming together’, ‘acceptance of self-reality’, and ‘creative synthesis’; 5) establishing continuity of self with past, present and future; and, 6) deciding whether to act on the outcome of the reflective process (p. 106). These observations serve well my thinking about reflection for they replicate the kinds of steps through which writers of personal history accounts move. Kathryn’s case, mentioned earlier, serves as a good example of this reflective process.

Kemmis (1985), however, believes that reflection is a political act, one which is action-oriented and embedded in history. It is a social process that serves human interests and a powerful vehicle to reconstruct social life. It shapes ideology and in turn is shaped by ideology. It needs to simultaneously explore both thought and action, and the individual and society. Further, according to Kemmis (1985), research about reflection needs to be reflective; individuals and groups must engage in ‘ideology-critique and participatory, collaborative and emancipatory action research’ (Noffke and Brennan, 1988, p. 16).

Reflection in Teacher Education

Zeichner and Teitelbaum (1982) argue that a critical inquiry approach to student teaching is ethically more justifiable than a personalized approach. A teacher education program constructed along the lines of a personalized approach is built in accordance with the needs of education students and ‘an attempt is made to have the substance of the program address questions that students are asking at their present level of development’ (pp. 95–96). According to them, the survival-oriented (personalized) approach, which ‘assumes that current concerns must be resolved before more mature concerns can emerge’ (p. 98), does not allow for thoughtful and reflective teaching.

While the critical inquiry orientation is often described as including all the other orientations, and so is all encompassing in one respect, I think the same case can be made for the personal orientation. While examining personal beliefs, values and orientations first, the need to examine them in the socio-political context arises (Sikes and Aspinwall, 1990). Thus, the critical inquiry approach can be viewed as a top-down approach, and the personal orientation can be viewed as a bottom-up approach.

Canning (1990) describes a personal orientation that begins as survival oriented and builds up to self-realization. She conceptualizes reflection as a process characterized by rambling, internal dialogue, questioning and the achievement of insight. She categorized reflection into two major categories: 1) those examples in which the person reflecting was focusing only on things outside him/herself (i.e. classroom events, students, and principles of learning and teaching); and, 2) those examples in which the person reflecting was
including him/herself as an object of reflection, demonstrating acceptance of self and a clarity of self perception.

Learning the Discourse of Reflection: From Life Histories to Reflexive Practice

I have presented the various perspectives on reflexive inquiry as a way of driving home the multi-faceted nature of the concept. Hopefully, I have also made it clear in the previous sections that students of teaching bring valuable insights—although not necessarily always the most substantiated and sound—to the arena of their new-found profession. My view is that these aspects of their thinking are wonderful and opportunistic springboards for professional development that is linked with not only the concept of life-history accounts but also with the more broadly identified issues and dilemmas in teacher education.

That most prospective teachers find it difficult to consider in critical ways the socio-political contexts of their future work world may merely reflect their inexperience at testing many of the assumptions about the world of teaching from other than their personal perspectives. It has been documented that only few teachers in preparation reflect critically in the sociopolitical context. Most use personal orientations (e.g. Gore and Zeichner, 1990). Individuals start with themselves when reflecting before encompassing the social, economic and political contexts. And, indeed, this seems like a logical place for individuals to start, and it belies the insistence that reflection is developmental in nature. It implies the position that the best place to start the practice, and the habitual use of it, is to begin with aspects of teaching that are more personal and immediately relevant, or seen to be relevant. The familiar is more comfortable than the unfamiliar as a place to start the process.

Further, it may not be reasonable to expect great evidence of critical reflection in prospective teachers within the time frame of typical teacher preparation programs. It may be more helpful first to adopt a more personal orientation in the advocacy of reflexive inquiry and then build on it the characteristics of critical inquiry—and this is the essential element of a conceptualization of reflection in which life-history analysis is a mirror. This position withstanding, I take the view that many prospective teachers have already developed notions and practices akin to reflection and the formalization of reflexive inquiry through the construction of the life-history accounts and the dialogue journal writing merely taps into informal well established evaluative/assessment practices of preservice teachers. The importance of mentioning the various orientations to and characteristics of reflection then, is to suggest that there are indeed multiple ways in which potential teachers may explore their own preconceptions and pre-intentions about teaching, in the process having their internal dialogues and practical arguments challenged, and new thinking put in place.
To present linear conceptions of reflection is problematic, as are developmental constructs. While my preference is ultimately to seek the development of reflexive inquiry in the vein of Grant and Zeichner’s (1984) stance, considering the socio-political influences, the enhancement of the developing practices of new teachers may be more usefully served by maintaining a broad front of challenges to long-standing beliefs about practice that explorations of pertinent life-history accounts may present.

The process of cultivating reflexive practices is, in the end, both a vehicle and catalyst for professional development. It is an avenue to induce, in prospective and beginning teachers, alternative approaches to thinking about practice, about the relationships between cause and effect of those practices, and about the place of those practices within the communities of classroom, school and society. The construction and use of life-history accounts in preservice teacher education provide opportunities for preservice teachers to learn from both the process and substance of their engagement in reflexive practical inquiry. And, this is but one avenue for the conceptualization of reflection in teacher education.

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