

REVIEWS

Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles. (2013).
By Thomas S. C. Farrell. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan. Pp. 162.

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It is commonly accepted that the act of teaching in and of itself is not sufficient for improving one's practice; rather, one must intentionally reflect upon one's actions and the worldviews that undergird them in order to grow (Murphy, 2014; Zeichner & Liston, 1992). In this spirit, Farrell participated in and studied a professional development group initiated by three mid-career college-level ESL teachers in Canada who desired to take a fresh look at their teaching. Documenting this experience in the pages of *Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles*, Farrell sets as his primary mission to "give...voice to experienced ESL teachers" (p. 1), claiming that the bulk of research in the field of teacher education has been conducted *on* teachers rather than *with* teachers and has thus put researcher's interpretations in front of those of teachers. He draws concrete implications from his study, stating that "a *Practice to Principles* [emphasis in original] approach to teacher development can give teachers, teacher educators, and administrators a realistic view of their worlds from their perspective and compare their views with what is being presented in current teacher education and development programs to see if these need change" (p. 14).

Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles contains nine chapters, flanked by an introduction and a "final reflections" section. In the introduction, Farrell situates his study within a bottom-up, transformational approach to professional development (see Kiely & Davis, 2010). In chapters one and two, he delves into the dual framing pillars of professional development and reflective practice. In chapters three through seven, he conveys the substance of his participants' reflections, first by exploring topics that arose through discussion and in writing and second by exploring topics related to three constructs: teacher beliefs, teacher roles, and critical incidents. Then, in chapters eight and nine, he takes up the concepts of teacher "plateauing" (i.e., "the frustration and disillusionment some teachers may experience over the course of their tenure in the classroom...that...usually happens to teachers in mid-career" [p. 14]) and teacher expertise. Finally, he concludes by casting professional development in the form of reflective groups as "professional *self*-development" [emphasis added]; that is, a practice in which "teachers are not struggling with any complex problems in their work, nor do they seek any qualification; what they do seek is a self-initiated understanding of themselves as teachers of a complex subject in a complex environment" (p. 152). Each of the nine chapters is summarized in turn in the paragraphs that follow.

In the book's opening two chapters, Farrell anchors his study in the literature on professional development and reflective practice. To begin, he defines and draws distinctions among several important terms related to teacher professional development, including top-down, bottom-up, training, development, and plateauing. He then mentions foundational research on teacher development cycles (stages), highlighting the mid-career cycle, as it pertains to the teachers with whom he collaborated. Evoking Dewey's writings on reflective practice, he takes the position that teachers should not let others tell them how to teach; rather, they should determine how to teach themselves by engaging in evidence-based reflective practice. In chapter two, he makes a distinction between informal/incidental and formal/evidence-based forms of reflective inquiry, noting that the latter stimulates teacher growth. He identifies teacher reflection groups and journal writing as fertile modes for evidence-based reflecting, with the premise that group reflecting is more effective than solo reflecting (Richards & Farrell, 2005) and that journal writing includes "built-in stoppage" (p. 41); that is, the ability to further reflect on a thought after it has been written down. The chapter closes with a list of assumptions about reflective practice (e.g., it involves problem-posing), in addition to criticisms leveled against it (e.g., does it actually foster student learning?). In chapters three and four, Farrell introduces us to the voices of his participants. Chapter three contains a recounting of three principal topics of discussion: school context, perceptions of self as teacher, and learners. For example, the teachers expressed frustration over their administrators' lack of understanding of their work. According to Farrell, the teachers developed greater awareness of their teaching via discussions and were able to find "renewal" in their teaching,

faced with plateauing. Farrell organizes chapter four similarly to chapter three, presenting three principal topics about which the teachers wrote: teaching approaches and methods, evaluating teaching, and perception of self as teacher. He notes that the teachers generally reflected more deeply in their writing than in group discussions. This observation would seem to relate to his claim that “the act of writing slows down our thinking so that we are in more control than when we are speaking” (p. 72).

Where Farrell organizes chapters three and four around mode of reflection, he organizes chapters five through seven around various teaching related constructs. At the beginning of chapter five, he claims that teachers must be aware of their beliefs and of the manifestation of their beliefs in practice in order to grow. He then elaborates five sources of beliefs expressed by his participants: teachers’ personality, teaching methods, established practice, experience of what works best, and experience as language teachers. In chapter six, he relates the participants’ sense-making of their roles, which he organizes into three role-identity meta-categories: teacher as manager, teacher as “acculturator” (a teacher “who engages in activities outside the classroom and that help [*sic*] students become accustomed to the local culture” [p. 97]), and teacher as professional. Each of these meta-categories contains sub-identities, such as entertainer (related to manager), social worker (related to “acculturator”), and collaborator (related to professional).

As with beliefs, Farrell claims that teachers need to develop an awareness of their role identities so that they “can start the process of trying to figure out who they are and who they want to become as they continue their careers as reflective practitioners” (p.107). To conclude this section, Farrell uses a narrative inquiry framework (McCabe, 2002) to examine two critical incidents: the first pertaining to negative feedback and the second pertaining to evaluation and feedback. Oddly, the examples he provides come from dealings with students in TESL (teaching English as a second language) classes rather than from ESL classes; it was not previously mentioned that the three participants taught TESL classes in addition to ESL ones at the time of data collection.

Chapters eight and nine (re)visit the concepts of plateauing and teacher expertise in light of the participants’ experiences. In the former, Farrell explains common causes of plateauing (e.g., teacher longevity), noting that reflection groups can be helpful in preventing it. He then explores several considerations related to setting up and maintaining reflection groups, ranging from assigning group roles to setting discussion topics. In the latter, after relating current definitions of teacher expertise, he demonstrates five ways in which the participants deployed their expertise (knowledge of learners and learning, engage in critical reflection, access past experiences, informed lesson planning, and active student involvement), while making it clear that “teaching experience does not automatically translate into teacher expertise unless teachers consciously and actively reflect on these experiences and engage in deep exploration of their practices at various times throughout their careers as ESL teachers” (p. 150).

On the whole, Farrell has authored a well-organized, readable, and accessible text, with broad appeal to teacher educators, teacher leaders, and those invested in forming teacher reflection groups. There are some limitations to the work, however. First, I find it to be unevenly theorized. Although Farrell identifies continued professional development (Kiely & Davis, 2010) as his principal theoretical framework in the introduction, he does not return to it while discussing his data. One is also left to wonder if continued professional development really qualifies as a theoretical framework. Second, I am unsure that Farrell achieves his goal of putting his participants’ voices first. Does he not process their interpretations through his own lens, much like other qualitative researchers do? What about this study puts participants’ voices “first?” Is it even possible to do so in research of this sort? Finally, there are several typos in the work that make reading at times jarring.

Despite these limitations, *Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles* makes a positive contribution to the field of language teaching and teacher education, most notably in its ability to scaffold reflective practice for teachers who wish to refresh their teaching and in helping administrators to understand the complex nature of ESL teachers’ work.

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