

Student Teachers' Experiences and Reflections on Biographical Interviewing as a Learning Method

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore how the use of biographical interviewing can work as a learning method in teacher education. The notion of biographical learning usually refers to the learning potential of autobiographical storytelling, i.e. learning from one's own life. However, in this study we were intrigued by learning from other people's life stories, which we call here "biographically-oriented learning". Student teachers conducted biographical interviews as part of the course "Arts and skills in education 1". Student teachers interviewed teachers who generally teach arts and skills, i.e. music, physical education, arts and/or crafts. The specific research questions of this study were: (1) What are student teachers' perceptions of a biographical interview? (2) Does a biographical interviewing method foster reflective learning? The data comprised reflective essays on teacher education (in portfolios) by student teachers (N=97) at the University of Eastern Finland in 2015. The approach to the data analysis was both inductive and deductive. The findings suggest that student teachers' perceptions of biographical interviews were positive. It was also found that a biographical interviewing method specifically supported dialogic and descriptive reflection. Biographical interviewing as a learning tool can support a movement from passive to more active learning.

Keywords: *Teacher education, Arts and skills studies, Biographical interviewing, Reflective learning, Student teacher, Learning method.*

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Highlights of this paper

- The aim of this study was to explore how the use of biographical interviewing can work as a learning method in teacher education.
- The findings suggest that student teachers' perceptions of biographical interviews were positive.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines how the use of biographical interviewing can serve as a pedagogical method of enhancing reflectivity in teacher education. Many studies have been conducted on using autobiographies (one's own biography) to enhance reflectivity (see e.g. [Kelchtermans \(2014\)](#)) but it appears that the potential for the biographies of other people to enhance reflectivity has not attracted attention in the teacher education literature.

In education, biographical interviewing has been applied in two different ways: (1) as a research method, i.e. biographical research and (2) as a learning method, i.e. biographical learning (see e.g. [Alheit \(1994\)](#)). The notion of biographical learning generally refers to the learning potential of autobiographical storytelling, i.e. learning from one's own life (see e.g. [Biesta and Tedder, 2007](#); [Hallqvist, 2014](#)). However, in this study we are interested in learning from other people's life stories, which we call here "biographically-oriented learning", and how it enhances reflectivity.

The value of reflective learning is widely acknowledged in educational circles as a way of improving deep and meaningful learning in higher education ([Moon, 1999](#); [Rogers, 2001](#)). Reflection is generally understood as being significant for teachers' development (see e.g. [Wood and Bennett, 2000](#); [Costigan and Crocco, 2004](#)).

There are many definitions and models of reflection. Historically, [Dewey \(1933\)](#) is recognized as being a key instigator of the notion of reflection. [Dewey \(1933\)](#) defined reflection as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends". After Dewey introduced his idea of reflection, there has been continuous discussion regarding its many components and how reflection really happens ([Ixer, 1999](#)). Several researchers have tried to clarify reflection by offering a conceptual model of various types of reflection (see e.g. [Van Manen, 1977](#); [Mezirov, 1981](#); [Schön, 1983](#); [Boud et al., 1985](#); [Habermas, 1987](#)).

[Hatton and Smith \(1995\)](#) have identified four types of reflection in their research project: (1) descriptive writing (non-reflective), (2) descriptive reflection, (3) dialogic reflection and (4) critical reflection. The first is not actually reflective at all; it merely describes incidents or literature. The second, descriptive reflection, provides explanations usually based on personal evaluation or on students' reading of literature. A student is searching for what is regarded as the "best possible" practice. The third type, dialogic reflection, is a form of discussion with one's self, an investigation of possible causes. A student is comparing competing claims and viewpoints, and then researching alternative solutions. The fourth, critical reflection, includes explanations of events or decisions that take into account the wider historical, social and/or political contexts. A student is viewing the aims and practices of one's profession as complicated, according to ethical criteria ([Hatton and Smith, 1995](#)).

The importance of reflective learning and diverse types of reflection has been recognized and discussed for decades. But how do you stimulate reflection in student teachers? [Hatton and Smith \(1995\)](#) have distinguished at least four broad strategies to foster reflection in student teachers: (1) action research projects, (2) case studies and ethnographic studies of teachers, students, classrooms and schools, (3) microteaching and other practicum experiences, and (4) curriculum tasks. Within these overall approaches, more specific techniques may be used, such as reflective essays, narratives and biographies ([Hatton and Smith, 1995](#)). In this study, we are specifically interested in using biographies to encourage reflection in student teachers.

Using biographies to foster reflective learning is a multifaceted process. Simply put, a biography can be understood as the story of a person's life as told or written by someone else (Christensen, 2012). By comparison, an autobiography is the life history of a person told or written by the person themselves (Christensen, 2012). Biographical learning connotes the above-mentioned meanings of the terms biography and autobiography (Christensen, 2012). Here, we concentrate on listening to biographies, i.e. student teachers interview teachers. The listening to biographies implies reception; the biographies are from outside the learner and must be received and interpreted by the learner.

In this article, we explore student teachers' experiences of biographical interviewing and how it supports reflective learning. To gain a deeper understanding of how biographical interviewing and reflective learning can be linked, we have analyzed students' portfolios in which they reflect on a biographical interview.

2. METHOD

The current study specifically examines student teachers' biographical interviewing by asking the following questions:

1. What are student teachers' perceptions of a biographical interview?
2. Does a biographical interviewing method foster reflective learning?

The research population comprised 147 students who were affiliated with three different programs (class teacher program, special teacher program and subject teacher program) at the University of Eastern Finland in the spring semester of 2015.

Students had been enrolled in the course "Arts and skills in education 1", which forms part of multidisciplinary studies. The course is aimed at first year students and is assessed as Pass or Fail. After the course, the students were asked if they wanted to submit their portfolios for the research. 97 students volunteered to participate in the research. There were 71 (73.2%) female students and 26 (26.8%) male students. Most of the students were between 20 and 25 years of age.

The course lasted nine weeks and included lectures and portfolio tasks. The largest task was conducting a biographical interview in pairs or individually. Before starting the biographical interview, the student teachers took part in a 1.5-hour training session in which they received instructions on how to conduct a biographical interview and on the importance of biographical interviewing. The training session was based on Perho and Korhonen (2008) research on autobiographies.

Each pair of students or individual student looked for teachers who generally taught arts and skills, i.e. music, physical education, arts, and/or crafts. The student teachers were instructed to record and transcribe the interviews. The goal was for students to familiarize themselves with a teacher's biography in the context of arts and skills.

Student teachers were also asked to reflect on their experience in a portfolio, as shown by the following extract from the written instructions for their portfolio: "Reflect on the interview experience. What kind of experience was it? What kind of thoughts and themes did the teacher's biography evoke in you?" There was no required length for reflection, but the average length was one page. The portfolios were not assessed; the students were simply required to submit a portfolio in order to pass the course.

A computer program for qualitative analysis (ATLAS.ti) was used in the analysis. First, we conducted a rough overview of all the essays and identified whether the student teachers' experiences were positive. Then we searched for types of reflection that utilized (Hatton and Smith, 1995) classification on levels of reflection. The unit of analysis was the complete thought, ranging from one sentence to multiple sentences.

Analysis was conducted in co-operation so that we coded the data in turns, discussed our differences of opinion and reached a shared conclusion on how the unit should be coded.

3. RESULTS

The participants described their experiences of biographical interviewing in several ways. The findings suggest that student teachers' experiences of biographical interviewing were positive (78) or neutral (19). No negative experiences were described in the data.

Several students (14) described how their attitudes changed from a neutral or negative initial reaction to a positive experience, as shown in the following example:

When I received the interview task, my initial reaction was negative. It sounded too tedious and, frankly, quite unnecessary. However, the interview had to be carried out so I looked for a teacher to interview. But as the interview date approached, my attitude towards the interview began to slowly change, and eventually I even started to look forward to the interview. As I was listening to the teacher's stories, my attitude changed completely and the experience was ultimately very positive (H58).

A number of descriptions (9) indicated that an experience was positive because the interviewer and the interviewee shared similar views. There was also one description in which the interviewer and the interviewee had different views (H42).

On the one hand, the interview was rewarding, and on the other hand, it raised questions because, in many ways, the interviewee had quite a different personality to me. Thus, his views about teaching were very different from mine (H42).

Students usually described their experiences on a general level although there were a couple of descriptions (3) in which you could also tell it was a positive experience from the perspective of arts and skills.

The interviewee somehow encouraged me to realize that I am able to teach art and skill subjects even if I am not super talented at them. On several occasions the interviewee emphasized that she was not at all gifted in handicrafts and didn't like studying it, although she is currently teaching it quite successfully (H26).

There were also descriptions (6) in which you can see that the experience was also rewarding for the interviewee.

After the interview, we continued to discuss a variety of themes for a long time. The interviewee seemed to be interested in my point of view after he had expressed his own views. It was really an instructive and reflective discussion and it appeared like we both felt it was useful (H20).

The types of reflection that we identified as being the way in which student teachers reconstructed their experiences about biographical interviewing were as follows: (1) descriptive writing that includes no reflection at all; (2) descriptive reflection, i.e. an emphasis on personally important practices and tips; (3) dialogic reflection, i.e. recognizing and exploring alternative practices or views; and (4) critical reflection, i.e. questioning and being able to look behind the practices and tips. The types of reflection were influenced by [Hatton and Smith \(1995\)](#) framework of types of reflection.

Table-1. Observed occurrence of the types of reflection related to biographical interviewing.

Type of reflection	Characteristics	Examples from the data
Descriptive writing 4% (13/332)	No reflection at all. A student only repeats what he/she has heard or read.	The interviewee stated that important characteristics of the teacher are clarity, orderliness and the ability to organize. (H12)
Descriptive reflection 44% (146/332)	A student describes good practices or tips that he/she feels are personally important.	I think it was a very good tip that a teacher must not be afraid of failure; we are all people, including teachers, and we can all make mistakes. (H56)
Dialogic reflection 49% (163/332)	A student recognizes and explores alternative practices or views. Reflection includes stepping back from events, pondering, or tentatively exploring causes.	The interview made me think about the impact of art and skill studies on students' self-concept. Art and skill studies can enhance self-concept, particularly if you are not good at theoretical subjects. On the other hand, they can create anxiety and impair self-concept if a student feels that he/she is not good at art and skill studies. In my case, skill and art studies have increased my coping and motivation at school. (H18)
Critical reflection 3% (10/332)	A student compares or evaluates practices or views considering political, social and/or cultural forces. A student may raise difficult, challenging or on-the-spot issues. A student may show evidence that they changed their perspective.	It was very interesting to hear how teacherhood has changed over time. I think that the change in teacherhood has its pros and cons. Teacherhood nowadays is freer, although the teaching profession is not valued in the same way it was valued previously. I think that changes in terms (e.g. students as clients) are associated with changes in teacherhood. (H39)

Source: Hatton and Smith (1995).

A total of 332 incidents of reflection were identified in the portfolios. The distribution across the categories is illustrated in Table 1.

Overall, the most common types of reflection were dialogic (163 coded units) and descriptive (146 coded units). There were only 13 coded units for non-reflective and 10 coded units for critical reflection. The largest number of reflective units coded for any single written piece was 12, and the smallest was 0.

The results from the analysis of written essays demonstrate clear evidence of student teachers' reflections on biographical interviewing. Only eight essays from the 97 cohort showed no evidence of reflection as defined above. Instances of critical reflection were found in only seven reports from the group of 97. Twenty-one (20.4%) essays included only dialogic reflection and nine essays (9.7%) included only descriptive reflection, although it should be noted that there were 57 (55.3%) essays that included multiple types of reflection.

4. DISCUSSION

On the basis of our analysis, it is possible to claim that biographical interviewing is a positive experience for student teachers. The writers of these reflective essays are very keen and see biographical interviewing as an important and rewarding tool. The "face-to-face" interview permits feelings to be perceived in real life through communicative interaction with a student (an interviewer) and a teacher (an interviewee). Biographical interviewing can also help students explore their understanding of teacherhood in art and skill education.

It was found that students were using a degree of reflection in their portfolios but were generally lacking in critical reflection. Why is this? Reflection in a portfolio was mandatory, although the portfolio was not graded. On the one hand, no grading could give students a sense of freedom to write more critically and deeply without any fear of criticism. On the other hand, assessment could lead to deeper reflection for those students who are motivated by grades.

How clear the instructions were regarding a reflection task and how much training was given to the students is also worth discussing. The written instructions for the reflection task were given very briefly but the purpose of the task was explained at the very start of the course and in the specific training session. However, emphasis was on conducting biographical interviews. There is a risk that, at the end of the course, certain students felt that reflection was an irritating task. But how do you develop instructions for promoting deeper or critical reflection for learning? Instructions and training could, for example, include suggestions on how to create associations between theory and practice, and on how to make links between specific details, general principles and professional knowledge.

Furthermore, just because reflection is not critical, it does not mean it is unimportant or unnecessary. The student teachers are at the start of their studies and are just entering the conscious process of reflective practice. As learners progress in their studies, they may advance to higher levels of reflection.

In conclusion, student teachers could benefit from other teachers' biographical stories. Interviewing teachers could support a movement from passive to more active learning. Meetings with a teacher, a more experienced colleague, could make it easier for student teachers to start reflecting on their concerns and ways of dealing with such concerns. This would give student teachers an opportunity to develop their teacher identity and help them cross the divide between teacher education and working life. In this way, the shift from university to working life would become smoother.

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