Core Reflection as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Implications for Teacher Education

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In this commentary, I explore a method of teacher reflection developed by Korthagen and colleagues, which they refer to as "core reflection" (Korthagen, Kim, & Green, 2013). Specifically, I have noticed that the process of "core reflection" bears a strong resemblance to self-fulfilling prophecies and other "placebo effects" observed in many medical and psychological studies (Price, Finniss, & Benedetti, 2008). It may be the case that this particular brand of teacher reflection is effective, not because teachers actually possess particular character strengths or virtues (as the method supposes), but because core reflection functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy: i.e., expectations bring forth changes in behavior. If, indeed, core reflection functions in this way, this insight has implications for teacher reflection and teacher education.

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A discussion about the nature of core reflection is timely, because the cultivation of virtuous teacher dispositions remains a highly sought after (yet murky) outcome in teacher education. Literature on virtuous teaching dispositions manifests one particularly prominent tension: are dispositions simply an enactment of specific skills and practices, or, are dispositions a product of a teacher's personality (Diez, 2007)? In this discussion, I want to transcend this debate entirely and make the novel point that it might not matter if dispositions are a product of a teacher's personality or if they are simply independent skill sets. Through the method of core reflection, teachers may be able to cultivate virtuous teaching behavior, regardless of whether they possess particular virtues; specifically, teachers may be able to cultivate these dispositions simply by believing that these dispositions emanate from within. In other words, the cultivation of virtuous teaching dispositions may be able to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Core Reflection

I will start by describing the method of core reflection, as proposed by Korthagen and colleagues. Korthagen (2013) believes that teachers should be encouraged to craft their classroom instruction by drawing on their own personal character strengths. He argues that if teachers are to be at their best, their teaching must flow out of who they are:

> [W]hen a teacher interacts with a class by asking questions, building on the answers given, eliciting further questions from the pupils, and so on, technically speaking this may be adequate teacher behavior, but the interaction has a deeper impact if the teacher's behavior is fed by core qualities such as care, enthusiasm, curiosity. (p. 33)

Korthagen's research (Evelein, Korthagen, & Brekelmans, 2008; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Korthagen & Wubbels, 2001; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009) has consistently found that when

teachers feel their instruction draws on their personal strengths (e.g., creativity, enthusiasm, fairness), they tend to report experiencing a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), i.e., a state of optimum engagement and effectiveness. Research on programs of core reflection have shown that teachers who identify and incorporate personal strengths into their work feel an increased sense of connectedness to others as well as an increased sense of professional autonomy (Attema-Noordewier, Korthagen, & Zwart, 2013). Conversely, when teachers feel that they are unable to be themselves in the classroom, they tend to feel stuck and emotionally exhausted. As one teacher participating in the process of core reflection reported,

> I know that [in] my first year [of teaching], what sunk me for a while was that I *wasn't* listening to what I felt, and I *was* listening to: "You need to do it this way." We teach who we *are* and if we aren't being us, if we're not being true to ourselves, and what we believe, then we're sunk. (Adams, Kim, & Greene, 2013, p. 67)

Therefore, the premise that each teacher possesses a unique set of core strengths is fundamental to Korthagen's theory of teaching and teacher development (Korthagen, 2004). What I want to add to this discourse, however, is the fact that this premise, first of all, may not necessarily be true (i.e., a teacher's "virtue" may simply be a matter of external behavior, not a matter of character or personality), and, second, may not be necessary for core reflection to remain effective in cultivating "virtuous" teaching behavior. Although I have long been fascinated by Korthagen's model of core reflection, I began to question its fundamental assumption (i.e., that each teacher possesses a set of core strengths) as I read analytic philosophy that called the idea of virtue into question. I will explore that philosophy (and the psychological research undergirding it) next.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies in Education

Research in social psychology has demonstrated that situational contexts can significantly mediate pro-social and intellectually virtuous behavior (Asch, 1956; Milgram, 1974; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). This calls into question the notion that individuals possess character strengths inherent to their personality (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Perhaps teachers' behaviors are not so much a product of who they are, but rather a product of the classroom contexts in which they teach (see Kennedy, 2005, 2010).

Following this line of thought, analytic philosopher Mark Alfano (2013) argues that concepts like virtue and character strengths are myths. Yet, significantly, Alfano suggests that the myth of virtue may still be worth perpetuating. He writes, "I am arguing for a sort of noble lie: people do not actually have the virtues, but we should tell them they do so that they behave themselves" (p. 98). Alfano's rationale is rooted in the phenomena of placebo effects and self-fulfilling prophecies (Price, et al., 2008). A common placebo effect in the field of medicine involves taking a pill that may or may not be efficacious: By simply believing that the pill will improve one's condition, one's condition improves. In other words, the beliefs "are not believed because they are true, but true because they are believed" (Alfano, 2013, p. 85).

Self-fulfilling prophecies may operate in regards to virtue as well (whether or not "virtue" metaphysically exists or not). For example, calling an individual "honest" may help the

individual to recognize moments where he or she is, in fact, behaving in a trustworthy manner. This in turn may inspire the individual to see himself or herself as an honest person, which may, thereby, inspire the individual to engage in behavior congruent with this virtue in the future. In this way, the individual acts in characteristically truthful and trustworthy ways because the individual *believes* that he or she is an honest person. Whether or not the individual was honest to begin with, the individual becomes so by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Placebo effects and self-fulfilling prophecies have been observed in the context of education. In one study (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), teachers were told that a randomly selected group of students was made up of "high potential gainers." By the end of the study, this group, indeed, made more significant gains in academic achievement and IQ scores than the rest of their classroom peers (see also Meichenbaum, Bowers, & Ross, 1969). Other research has found that when students are told they possess particular traits (high ability, hard working) they come to display these characteristics; however, this effect is not seen when students are merely encouraged to display these traits (Zanna, Sheras, Cooper, & Shaw, 1975). These studies among others are evidence that self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful in the context of education: If students (or teachers) believe that they genuinely possess a particular intellectual quality (because others appraise them as possessing it), they are more likely to display the given quality.

Core Reflection as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Like other models of teacher reflection, Korthagen's model of core reflection asks teachers to reflect on incidents from their teaching by 1) describing the event, 2) interpreting the event, and 3) proposing a future course of action. Core reflection is unique, however, in the way that it seeks to highlight how the given teacher's virtues and character strengths are present (or absent) from a given episode. By explicitly calling attention to the way a teacher's core strengths may or may not be exhibited, teachers can begin to recognize the ways in which their personal strengths are shaping (or could shape) their classroom instruction.

For example, consider the following transcript from a session of core reflection (as quoted in Korthagen, 2013, p. 34) between a teacher (T) and her student (S):

> T: Do you feel trust in yourself when working on this assignment?
> S: Uh…no, I do not have so much trust in myself.
> T: Do you mean when working on this subject, or in general?
> S: Um…yeah, in fact I never feel much trust in myself.
> T: Take a moment to see whether there have been occasions in your life when you did feel trust in yourself.
> S: Um…yeah, when I went to town to buy Christmas presents for my family, I had some good ideas, and I also made the presents look nice. Yeah, that felt good.
> T: Great, so then you felt trust?
> S: Yes, sure!
> T: So you do have the quality of trust in you!

This method of reflection helps the participants (in this context, a student) to recognize his or her strengths and to imagine ways these strengths might be utilized in one's professional life.

In light of what was discussed earlier in this paper, I want to explore how the salutary effects of Korthagen and colleagues' (2013) method of core reflection may be a function of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If teachers and students are coached to recognize particular character strengths in their behavior (for example, the phrase "So you do have the quality of trust in you!"), then these strengths may become part of the participant's self-concept. As a result, the individual may begin to act more congruently with this self-concept by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy. We might ask, in the conversation quoted above, is the student authentically identifying the character strength of "trust" within himself? Alternately, is the student being coached (or coaxed) by the teacher to integrate this character strength into his self-concept? Answers to these questions may not matter. Instead, the student's confirmation, "Yes, I do have the quality of trust within me!" may be enough to catalyze a change in behavior.

We can see a similar pattern of interaction in the following passage, this time between a teacher (T) and her reflective coach (C):

> T: There was a big rip between my values and [the principal's]…It made me ask, "Am I not doing a good enough job with academics?"…Am I giving them [the students] enough academically, or am I spending too much time building community?
> C: Your values and your passion for doing the right things for kids just totally shine through. You are asking the questions you should be asking. You are a great teacher; it shines out of you every time you come here.

Perhaps the teacher in this passage will come to believe that she does indeed possess a "passion for doing the right things for kids" and that this passion inevitably "shines out" of her teaching. In other words, the teacher may believe that this is a character strength that manifests in her professional life, and, because of this belief, the teacher may indeed continue to behave in ways consistent with this strength. Furthermore, if this virtuous behavior is able to manifest itself in this teacher's teaching, even if by means of a self-fulfilling prophecy, then it may not matter whether or not this teacher actually possesses this particular virtue. The teacher's behavior will be in accord with the teaching dispositions we would want teachers to display.

Implications for Teacher Education

These considerations are especially relevant in the context of teacher dispositions. Are dispositions personality traits, or are they simply external behaviors? If we entertain the idea that virtue may actually be a myth but that virtuous dispositions can be cultivated via self-fulfilling prophecies, then the murkiness of the construct of dispositions may be a moot point. This is a novel position to take, since many scholars have argued about what the true nature of teaching dispositions is (or should be). Entertaining the idea that core reflection might serve as a method to cultivate virtue "factitiously" (Alfano's term) transcends the debate as to whether or not dispositions are personality traits or external behaviors. If we *tell* teachers that their virtuous behaviors are products of their personality, then teachers may cultivate their virtuous behavior, given that this behavior is now consistent with their self-concept (i.e., I am an honest person; I am a teacher who always does what is in the best interests of my students). In this way, core reflection may function as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

As teacher educators, we can imagine the possibilities: What might happen if we told novice teachers, "I can tell that you are someone who is patient," or, "I can tell that you are someone who is open-minded"? What if, rather than simply encouraging novice teachers to manifest particular dispositions (i.e., telling them that it is important for teachers to be open-minded), novice teachers were told that they inherently possessed these character strengths? In other words, if teacher educators tell novice teachers that they possess certain character strengths (even before these virtues have come to manifest themselves fully or consistently in action), then novice teachers might come to develop these strengths by means of simply believing they have them.

Although Korthagen and colleagues have previously conceptualized the process of core reflection exclusively in terms of inherent character strengths (i.e., every individual possesses a unique set of character strengths; see Peterson & Seligman, 2004), in this discussion I have tried to contribute to core reflection's utility by arguing that this method of teacher reflection may still produce "virtuous" teacher behavior even if this virtue is a myth. Core reflection—that is, the process of telling beginning teachers that they are behaving virtuously in the classroom (whether they are or not)—might be able to propel teachers towards behaving in increasingly professional and ambitious ways. I recommend, therefore, that programs of teacher education carefully consider how self-fulfilling prophecies can shape a novice teacher's development. We should attend carefully both to how a novice teacher's self-concept can shape his or her behavior as well as to how a novice teacher's self-concept can be nurtured in teacher education.

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