

Reflection in initial teacher education: case for a comprehensive framework

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This qualitative case study explores perceptions of university tutors and student teachers involved in a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme, at a UK university, regarding the connotation and implementation of *reflection* as a teacher education concept. *Reflection* has been a complex and at times elusive educational concept; however, in many educational programmes it is often applied without acknowledgement of this complexity. This current study establishes that practitioners often focus *reflection* on the *how* of teaching, ignoring the *what* and *why* of the process. In other words the role and promise of *reflection* at the higher/critical level is not clearly recognised and appreciated. The study suggests that for a more useful incorporation of reflection in education programmes such as the PGCE in this study, the concept needs to be appreciated with its theoretical basis and its historical context. This calls for the inclusion of reflection with a comprehensive framework in educational and training programmes such as the PGCE and other teacher education programmes.

Key Words: Reflection, teacher education, reflective practice, PGCE

Reflection has been a complex educational concept with multiple conceptualisations. Although its history can be traced back to Dewey (1933) and much before him to ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle (Hatton and Smith, 1995), as a teacher education construct reflection became popular during the 1980's in response to 'calls for the professionalization of teaching and teacher education' Korthagen (1993, p.317).

Many other researchers link the beginning of the current emphasis on training and development of new teachers as reflective practitioners to developments in the 1980s and 1990s (Smyth, 1989; Gore, 1987; Killen, 1989; Zeichner and Liston, 1996). The teacher as a reflective practitioner and as a leader of the education and curriculum development process were concepts that got momentum during this period. The effect according to Korthagen and Russell (1995) has been more emphasis on the development of creative individuality of a teacher than on the transfer of general theoretical knowledge about education and teaching.

Abundant research has been done on the concept since then and reflection has consequently become part of the language of teacher education (Korthagen and Wubbels, 1991). Calderhead (1989) argues that reflection has also been interpreted in teacher education programmes depending on its purpose and utility. Those who believe in behaviouristic approach (Cruickshank et al., 1981, Killen (1989) to teacher education take a technical view of the term for enhancing the skills of student teachers and others with

more critical approaches (Zeichner and Liston, 1996; Gore, 1987; Smyth, 1989) extend the agenda for reflective teaching into bigger issues such as its use for 'emancipation and professional autonomy' (Calderhead, 1989, p.45).

Zeichner, 1994 and Zeichner and Liston (1996) have identified five 'traditions' of reflective teaching practice in the US teacher education context. Comprehensive elaborations on this can be found in Zeichner, 1994 and Zeichner and Liston (1996) who have identified a number of traditions in this regard: the academic tradition, the social efficiency tradition, the developmentalist tradition, the social reconstructionist tradition and, the generic tradition. The academic tradition according to Zeichner 'emphasizes the teacher's role as a scholar and subject-matter specialist'. 'Disciplinary' knowledge is emphasized in this tradition; 'complimented by apprenticeship experience in a school' and 'the contribution of schools, colleges, and departments of education...' has been 'belittled' (Zeichner, 1994, p.22).

The social efficiency tradition emphasizes 'the intelligent use of "generic" teaching skills and strategies which have been suggested by research' (Zeichner, 1994, p.24). Feiman-Nemser (1990) as reported by Zeichner (1994, p.24) has identified two ways in which this tradition has been interpreted: the 'technological version' which aims at reflection of teachers about how to conform their practices to standards provided by researchers and the 'deliberative orientation' in which teacher educators prepare teachers to use research-based knowledge but also to 'exercise their judgement about various teaching skills', using their 'experience, intuition, and their own values...' (Zeichner, 1994, p.24).

The developmentalist tradition focuses reflection on the 'natural development' of the learner and its impact on the subject-matter and methodology of teaching. 'The selection and adoption of subject-matter and teaching method is

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determined by the careful observation and description of students' behaviour at various stages of development...' (Zeichner, 1994, p.24). Perrone (1989 cited in Zeichner, 1994) associates three central metaphors with this tradition: the teacher as naturalist, who focuses on closely observing the child behaviour and development and adjusting the teaching-learning process and content accordingly; the teacher-as-researcher who teaches through experiments and inquiry; and the teacher-as-artist bringing in intuitive creativity in the teaching-learning situation in the classroom (Zeichner, 1994: 24-25).

The social reconstructionist tradition emphasizes a broader scope for teachers' reflection enfolded issues such as justice, equity, and emancipation, upholding the cause of democracy and the maintenance or disruption of the status quo. The generic tradition of reflection according to Zeichner (1994, p.27) emphasizes 'reflective teaching in general'. According to this tradition it is the process of reflection and not the product or subject-matter of it that is more important. Zeichner (1994, p.29) cautions against this generic reflection as '...all teachers are reflective in some sense' and that 'we must be interested in more complex questions than whether teaching is reflective or not'. This is an important observation as it seems to recognise the complexity of the concept, acknowledgement of which is important as a safeguard against it being turned into a slogan (Zeichner and Liston, 1996). This observation is of particular significance for this current study as an important goal has been to explore the subject-matter and the aims and focus that the participants associate with the concept of reflection in the PGCE.

Reflection and teacher education in the UK

Like in many other countries, reflection has been a popular concept and is recognised as one of the most important components of many teacher education programmes in the UK (Calderhead, 1989; McIntyre, 1993, 1995; Calderhead and Gates, 1993; Day, 1993; Moon, 1999, 2004; Atkinson, 2004; Harrison, 2008; Harrison and Lee, 2011). The increasing 'political control, curricular prescription, and the celebration of the practical' (Schnur and Golby, 1995, p.14) in teacher education programmes by the government through its agencies such as the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) have been received with scepticism by educational researchers and teacher education providers with an apprehension that the development would lead to the preparation of new teachers on more technicist rather than reflective lines. It is also feared that increasingly school-based teacher training would deprive it of its intellectuality (Wilson, 1989; Schnur and Golby, 1995; Crook, 2002) and would reduce such teacher training programmes to producing teachers as technicians with a purpose of implementing a centralised curriculum rather than as reflective practitioners capable of making independent curricular and educational decisions. This tendency, it is argued, would also lead to weakening of the autonomous

character of universities as teacher education institutions and would result in a decline in the research and academic culture in educational institutions (Hartley, 1995, 1998).

But despite the increasing standardisation, top-down structure and centralisation of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) the development of teachers on reflective grounds has been a consistent goal of teacher education programmes both on the policy and implementation levels. For example a number of 'standards' mentioned in the 'Professional Standards for Teachers' of the Teacher Development Agency (TDA, 2007), a policy document in vogue when this study began, mention 'reflection' and 'criticality' as attributes required for the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Under the heading 'Personal professional development', award of QTS require teachers to '[r]eflect on and improve their practice, and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their developing professional needs'(Standard Q7.a), to '[h]ave a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified' (Q.8).

Similarly, under the heading 'Achievement and diversity', to '[u]nderstand how children and young people develop and that the progress and well-being of learners are affected by a range of developmental, social, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic influences' (Q18). Under the heading, 'Assessing, monitoring and giving feedback', to 'support and guide learners to reflect on their learning, identify the progress they have made and identify their emerging learning needs' (Q.28) (Teacher Development Agency, 2007). Thus reflection has been consistently identified as one of the basic aims of teacher training programmes.

Reflection and the PGCE (Secondary-Level) programme under this study

The PGCE under study comprised four modules, two at the intermediate Honours ('H') level and two at Masters ('M') level. There were two semesters and each semester consisted of one 'H' level and one 'M' level module. The 'H' level consisted of professional school experiences. The 'M' level consisted of teaching, learning and assessment for learning in the secondary school. Some of the aims of this module included developing the ability of student teachers to evaluate research that underpins current practice in teaching and learning; development of the practical pedagogical skills of the student teachers; to critically analyse and justify with reference to published research; and to develop the ability of students to reflect on their teaching and their students' learning. Further successful student teachers were expected to be able to reflect on and critique the planning, teaching and evaluation process used by them and others.

The aims of the second module at the 'M' level included the development of the ability of the student teacher for an

engagement on a critical level with the relevant subject and involvement in action research. Reflection on the developing classroom practice, engagement in research and reading and writing at the M-level were other expectations from student teachers. Further, a successful student teacher was deemed to have developed the ability to critically evaluate pedagogic theories, and to reflect on, research and critique a critical issue in the teaching of their chosen subject. The assessment at the end of this module included demonstration of theoretical understanding of the subject matter and the pedagogical requirements to teach and critically evaluate the teaching-learning process. In the specialist subject study student teachers were required to conduct an investigation into an aspect of their relevant subject for critical evaluation in the form of action research or critical incident analysis, which is being conducted during the teaching practice placement.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative naturalistic case study design. The present study being exploratory in nature, case study design fitted well for the purpose. Cohen et al. (2007) include naturalistic case study approach in the broader interpretative paradigm of research. Citing researchers such as Boas (1943), Woods (1992), and LeCompte and Preissle (1993), Cohen et al. (2007) mention some of the salient features of research in this paradigm such as construction of meanings by humans in context, the multi-faceted-ness of reality, the time-and-context-bounded-ness of hypotheses, value-bounded-ness of inquiry, the significance of the views of data sources in the construction of reality, the flexible nature of the inquiry and the inductive analysis of data.

The present study was conducted with a belief in the multi-faceted-ness of reality and its time and context bounded-ness. The design of the study remained open and flexible with an inductive analytical approach and with a focus on a specific phenomenon i.e. reflection.

Sample and data collection process

Purposive sampling technique (Cohen et al., 2007) was used during the selection of data sources. Purposive sampling technique is widely used in naturalistic, qualitative research studies. After an extensive literature review and analysis of the relevant documents in the programme under study, data were collected from the teacher educators (tutors) involved in the programme and student teachers. Data were collected during a period between August, 2009 and March, 2010 from 14 university tutors, using standardised-open-ended (Patton, 1980) and semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al., 2007), and 21 student teachers using semi-structured emailed questionnaires (Kitto and Barnett, 2007).

Data were collected from university tutors once, while from student teachers data were collected on two occasions. Once, in the initial phase of the PGCE training and again,

towards the end of the training programme. In order to triangulate and strengthen data obtained from student teachers through emailed questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were also conducted towards the end of the training programme with selected student teachers.

Data analysis and ethical considerations

Data thus obtained were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) there are the 6 phases of conducting thematic analysis: Familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Familiarization with the data was done by listening to tapes and reading transcriptions and notes. This led to the generation of initial ideas and themes which got refined as the process of analysis and review moved on. The study was conducted after ethical approval was granted by the relevant institutional ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained and participants have been kept anonymous as per the terms of the consent forms.

Discussion

University Tutors' definitions of reflection

Reflection was defined mainly in two ways by the university tutors. Primarily, it was defined in terms of 'thinking about' things (referred to in this study as *monologic* reflection). This is what could be termed as a more individual, inward looking and theoretical (abstract) view of reflection.

A second and relatively less prevalent view was its definition as a systematic and active *process* of individual and/or collaborative inquiry (Jay and Johnson, 2002). This represented the view of reflection as a more experiential and practical rather than theoretical process and is identified in this study as *dialogic* reflection which resembles (but is not the same) what Hatton and Smith (1995, p. 45) also call dialogic reflection that aims at looking for 'competing claims and viewpoints and then exploring alternative solutions'.

Monologic reflection varied in its scope, ranging from thinking on the technical and practical levels (Van Manen, 1977; Hatton and Smith, 1995), encompassing issues of immediate relevance to teachers such as classroom management, lesson planning, delivery and assessment; and personalistic reflection (Valli, 1997) such as thinking about the self and personal experiences, and improvement of the teaching skills.

On a broader level monologic reflection included thinking about issues such as the relevance or otherwise of the subject-matter, school policies; factors outside the classroom impacting students' behaviour, the purpose of education and the teaching profession, and the philosophy behind the educational process.

Technical/practical, routine, classroom, teaching-learning issues

Reflection on the technical level was associated with thinking about issues of practical and immediate concern to the student teachers. These included matters such as effective teaching in classroom, classroom management, behavioural issues and discipline, preparation and delivery of lesson plans, lesson evaluations and developing effective relationships with students and colleagues. The overall focus was on the technical and to an extent the practical levels (Van Manen, 1977) where the technical considers the effectiveness of means to get to ends and the practical considers the value of those ends.

This seems to be a pragmatic view as that is perhaps the elementary aim of initial teacher education such as the PGCE. This pragmatism was also visible in the fact that most tutors began with but went beyond defining reflection in terms of its focus on technical and practical issues. This is consonant with literature regarding reflection where technical expertise has been discussed as a consistent theme as a very important aim (Cruikshank, 1981; Killen, 1989; Valli, 1997; Jay and Johnson, 2002).

However, some researchers caution against the overemphasis of reflection on the technical level and warn that if it stays at that level then that is not reflective teaching (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, Valli, 1997). Valli (1997, p.70), for instance, considers a focus on the 'outward forms of teaching methods...' as technical training and contrasts it with reflective teacher education which prepares teachers to reflect on issues ranging from curricular, instructional and managerial to those concerning the social, political and moral dimensions of the process of education.

Bigger issues/ 'critical' aspects of reflection

Although some tutors restricted the scope of reflection to technical issues, most extended it to broader issues. The issues that were identified as the possible subject-matter of reflection included 'wider professional expectations', the overall social and moral development of the students, and the meaning, aims and the ultimate purpose of education. As one tutor put it:

I think they need to reflect on some of the big questions, what is education for? Um, what should the role of the teacher and the students be within the classroom...one of the things that I do with the students very earlier on, on my course with the ... students that I have ... is to make it very clear, that one of the things that I want them to develop is their own educational philosophy and ... that creating an educational philosophy is not something that only professors can do.

General meaning/ reflection as thinking about 'everything'

This theme represented what Zeichner and Liston (1996) identify as the generic reflection. Also this

interpretation of the concept reflects what Valli (1997, p.75) calls 'deliberative reflection' or reflection that covers a 'whole range of teaching concerns, including students, the curriculum, instructional strategies' and classroom management. Reflection is considered as some kind of thinking about the teaching learning situation without any specific focus or direction in terms of its subject-matter.

Oh! Everything! (Laughs). I like it most when they can reflect on their own assumptions and expectations and to analyse whether they need to change them or to be aware about their preconceptions about people that they have changed.

This could be interpreted on the one hand as a common-sense; all-encompassing view of reflection or reflection as a 'slogan' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996) and on the other it could be due to the absence of a clear reflective framework as far as the particular understanding of some tutors is concerned.

The evolution and variability of reflection

A number of tutors identified reflection as an evolutionary concept. According to this view the subject-matter of reflection evolves with time and depends on the level of understanding of different student teachers who might be at different stages of intellectual and professional development.

I think it's different for different people and different at different times. So...You know if they have a poor lesson where the children are behaving badly then they will reflect on that more than whether they produced a good lesson with good subject knowledge. So I think it's different you know in different times the more competent they become they reflect on different things.

This seems to have important implications for effective inculcation of reflection for student teachers who are at various stages of their professional development. For instance it could be deduced from the above that the teaching and classroom experiences and the educational background of individual student teachers need to be taken into consideration while exposing them to the concept. Further it seems to indicate that the type and scope of reflection itself is shaped and influenced by individual abilities and practical classroom requirements on the part of the student teachers.

Other issues that were mentioned variously by tutors as the subject-matter of reflection included the nature and socio-cultural development of students, their needs, potentials and individuality, new role as teachers, and also issues related to their personal life, assumptions and expectations as professionals and as individuals.

Dialogic reflection

In its dialogic sense reflection was defined in ways such as a methodical examination of processes, assumptions and finding evidence leading to interpretation and re-interpretation of educational phenomenon:

Reflection in the context of teacher education means... the capacity to look backwards, examine evidence and to interpret meaning, to find meanings in relation to situations or ideas or whatever.

In this sense it was also defined as a process of metacognition, deconstruction and systematic inquiry along the lines of action research. Also this included scaffolding and structuring learning experiences for students:

I think reflection itself is a cyclic process of doing something, whatever it might be and then actually having the meta-cognitive skills to deconstruct what it is you have done or even deconstruct an issue...So yes they [student teachers] are reflecting if you like academically and theoretically but they are also reflecting experientially. So it might be about a paper, it might be about a particular issue, it might be looking at...um, a recording of an observation...

The above thus associates reflection in its more systematic sense on the one hand with thinking on a more theoretical level about academic issues and on the other extending that theoretical thinking into practical theorising (McIntyre, 1993) where reflection comes out as a result of experimentation and exploration and testing of educational concepts during practical teaching.

Student teachers' meaning of reflection

Questions regarding the meaning of reflection were asked on two occasions from student teachers: in the beginning of the PGCE, when the student teachers had been in the programme for about two months and so had some introduction to the concept and again towards the end of the programme. Reflection defined on both occasions could be categorised in terms of it being considered as a *process*, and as an *attribute*.

As a *process* it was primarily defined as thinking that aims at the assessment and evaluation of teaching practices for development and improvement. Reflection, on this count, was largely defined on the technical and practical level (Van Manen, 1977; Zeichner and Liston, 1996) and/or as the technical, deliberative and personalistic types of reflection (Valli, 1997). With a technical/practical focus the concept was associated with issues of immediate, practical concerns such as classroom management, lesson delivery, behavioural issues, individual learning needs and effective use of resources.

As one student teacher elaborates

Evaluating the good and the bad points of the lesson. What did not work and why? What did work and why? What

type of classes i.e. teaching ability, the time of day of lesson and also the day of the lesson where I would or would not carry on with a particular activity? How I can improve the lesson and asking other staff of how I could improve the teaching next time.

The focus of reflection here seems to be on the 'how' rather than the 'what' and 'why' of the teaching process. In a similar vein another student teacher described the subject-matter of reflection as thinking about:

All aspects of a lesson- the way pupils are entering, seated, work presented, assessed, taught, words used during explanations, comments in marking, the way pupils are allowed to behave during lessons, the discipline used to manage behaviour, etc.

Other issues identified as the focus of reflection at this level included the way children work, the environment in the classroom during lessons, and the choice and use of teaching strategies and the ways and means to develop student interest and motivation in the teaching process. A minority of the participants mentioned slightly broader, beyond-the-classroom issues as subject-matter for reflection, for instance parental role in the process of education and the teacher's ability to collaborate with them (Valli, 1997; Zeichner and Liston, 1996).

Towards the end of the PGCE, student teachers were presented with responses they gave at the beginning of the course and asked if they still adhered to their earlier definition of reflection. Three kinds of responses were found: responses reporting no change, responses showing some development into slightly higher levels of reflection and responses showing a reversal to the more technical and practical focus of reflection. Significantly, a majority, that is about two-thirds of the participants, did not report any change in their definition of reflection.

While a minority defined reflection in terms which went beyond 'survival', i.e. reflection that concerns the 'social, moral or political dimensions of schooling' (Valli, 1997, p.75), for the majority the focus of reflection throughout the course remained on the more technical, general level revolving around issues of practical import to them rather than on issues associated with the higher levels of reflection. In some cases this could be categorised as 'personalistic reflection' (Valli, 1997), with a focus on themselves and their relationship with students or tutors. Even in terms of personalistic reflection, the focus seems to have been on behaviour management and the 'how' of teaching and learning rather than the 'why' of it.

Changes which were identified by the remaining participants included moving the focus of reflection up from the more general thinking about practices and how to improve to reflection as a more systematic evaluation of the lessons, from more hypothetical reflection to reflection as a

process of learning during experience, from just looking back on their teaching practices to constructive criticism of their work and from reflection about the self, teaching methods and classroom management to reflection on the needs of students to improve their learning. This latter kind of change has been interpreted differently by researchers. For instance a focus on the self as compared to that on the students' needs has been associated with either lower or higher level of reflection (Jay and Johnson, 2002; Moore and Ash, 2002; Moore, 2004).

This seems to be mainly due to the different interpretations of the concept by these writers. However, to this researcher this seems to have more to do with the student teachers' *focus* of reflection in response to the demand of their situation - their practical involvement in classroom teaching, behaviour management issues, and teaching strategies during practice - rather than it being an indication of a possible increase or decrease in the level of reflection. Further, the more technical focus of reflection at this stage seems also to be due to a lack of behaviour management skills and subject-teaching expertise, factors which according to (Moore, 2004), could contribute to focus on issue of practical import among beginning teachers. Another development reported was more frequent reflection and a realisation of the usefulness of reflection in practice. The frequency in reflection seems to be because of the student teachers' involvement in practical teaching at this stage as compared to the initial stages in the PGCE.

The third kind of response, that is, reverting back to the technical/practical emphasis of reflection by those student teachers (less than one-third) who in the beginning had defined the concept in slightly broader critical terms, seems to be an indication of a pre-occupation with immediate survival needs at this initial stage of their practical involvement in teaching, which is likely to have them leave the idealism of reflecting on broader issues and to instead focus on the technical skills required for classroom teaching.

Conclusion and implications

On the whole, although both university tutors and student teachers largely associated reflection with some kind of *thinking and deliberation* about teaching-learning issues, university tutors' definitions of reflection suggested - perhaps understandably - a more multifaceted appreciation of the concept. Further, the university tutors' definitions of reflection encompassed its more technical meaning as well as its meaning and implication on the higher critical level. Student teachers' focus of reflection, primarily, remained at the practical level with minimal appreciation of the concept at the critical level (Valli, 1997).

However, overall, across the two groups there was more convergence rather than divergence in terms of identifying reflection as a common-sense (Akbari, 2007) educational concept focused on assessing and improving teaching practices at the technical and practical levels with not much

reference to the definitional and conceptual complexities involved in it. This seems plausible in view of the predominantly practice-based and school-centred structure of the PGCE. Student teachers' performance is assessed, largely, in terms of their ability as effective, skilled classroom teachers in the school during their training year. Similarly, university tutors are expected to *train* student teachers as skilled classroom practitioners to deliver a centralised curriculum.

Further, this pragmatism on the part of university tutors and student teachers to have the focus of reflection at the practical level seems a fit-for-purpose response to the challenging demands of early teaching experiences which is entirely legitimate and essential at this stage of early professional development. That granted, understanding the value of deeper/critical notions of reflection during the early stages of professional development is important for later development of expert pedagogy, once teachers get the practical confidence to get through a lesson.

Another reason for the prevalence of the common-sense meaning of reflection seems to be what was reported as the relatively new emphasis of the concept in the programme. The concept was particularly associated with the new introduction of Masters Level PGCE. In Masters level assignments, although student teachers were required to take a more critical and analytical, rather than descriptive, approach to issues, the rather new emphasis could be one reason for the more general approach to the concept and might develop and evolve with time once it is well-established in the course.

Some of the relatively new tutors also pointed out their own restricted understanding of the concept mentioning their limited experience as teacher educators and exposure to the intricacies of the concept. On both counts it can be argued that despite the popularity and long history of the concept in teacher education, its incorporation in educational programmes in terms of its aims, subject-matter and usefulness is better not taken for granted. There is, thus, a case for a more overt and elaborate incorporation of reflection in such programmes. Reflection incorporated in this way will focus not just on the *how* of the teaching learning-learning process but also the *what* and *why* of it (Birmingham, 2004). In other words the focus of reflection will enfold not just how to teach or how to learn practical teaching skills but also the subject-matter of teaching (curriculum) and the broader aims and objectives of the educational process.

This will make the concept more useful for student teachers both in terms of its application on the practical classroom level and on the broader critical level. Besides, an overt and comprehensive inclusion of reflection in the PGCE and similar educational and training programmes will have long-term developmental impact on the future development of teachers as professionals, as educational thinkers and as

leaders not just in curriculum implementation but in the development and innovation of the educational process.

The implication for the PGCE in terms of the connotation of reflection could be that reflection as a teacher development concept needs to be more clearly defined across the different subjects and strands of the course. This would unfold reflection both at the technical/survival issues as well as broader critical/theoretical underpinnings of the concept. In the absence of such an ample framework student teachers might not be able to develop the ability to question '...the goals and the values that guide [their] work [and] the context in which he or she teaches...' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996 in Akbari, 2007, p.197).

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