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The Role of Reflection in Teaching: Perceptions and Benefits

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Abstract

Teaching is a challenging career that calls for a continuous tightrope walk, making resilience and adaptability pivotal to teacher survival. Teachers need to be able to be aware of their previous practices and to constantly examine and assess their effectiveness, attitudes, and accomplishments. This awareness comes through the coherent and sustained practice of reflective thinking, in which they can cultivate the habits of inquiry and reflection that are so needed in the teachers' profession.

This paper presents a detailed inquiry of the reflective practices of 10 experienced educational practitioners (primary school teachers; all female, aged 38-55 years, average age 44) as they self-study their teaching practices to discover how reflection in practice impacts their growth as teachers.

The data was collected through a structured reflective journal (based on Smyth's model for personal and professional empowerment) and a focus group interview. After the analysis of the data extracted from the focus group, two main themes emerged: a shift in perception about reflective practice and the impact of the use of reflection on teachers as professionals.

Findings suggest that having a structure can help teachers become more conscious of one's experiences, as they purposefully inquire and critique their practice. The potential benefits of deliberately engaging in reflective activities are discussed.

Keywords: *reflective practice, reflective teaching, reflective journal, critical reflection, primary school teacher*

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1. Introduction

Teaching is a challenging career that calls for a continuous tightrope walk, making resilience and adaptability pivotal to teacher survival (Day & Qing, 2009). The increasing expectations for the teaching profession were analyzed in a report by the European Parliament: "The profession of teaching is firstly becoming more and more complex; secondly, the demands placed upon teachers are increasing; and thirdly, the environments in which they work are becoming more and more challenging" (European Parliament, 2014, p. 13). Nowadays, the educational landscape requires teachers to be top-level knowledge workers who unceasingly improve their professional knowledge. Apart from the fact that educators must be well-versed in the subject(s) they teach, they need to acquire a complex list of competencies to successfully teach 21st-century skills to their students. Consequently, they need to master content-specific strategies and methods, as well as the knowledge of when and how to apply them from a robust repertoire of teaching strategies. Also, educators need to develop solid skills in technology and the use of it as a powerful tool for maximizing the utilization of digital resources in school activities. As collaboration is concerned, teachers should be able to work smoothly with other teachers within the same organization, as well as professionals in other organizations related to the education landscape. They need to evaluate objectively and include personalized feedback to optimize student learning. Teachers need to display a profound understanding of how learning takes place and of students' interests, motivations, emotions, and lives outside the classroom. Just as importantly, educators need to reflect on their practices to learn from their experiences as professionals. And the list could go on. According to various researchers, the management of such demands can be mitigated through critical reflection and reflective practice (Bright, 1996; Butville et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2022; Reagan et al., 2000; Van Manen, 1995).

Educational researchers have long called for renewed efforts to equip teachers with the ability to meticulously and purposely use reflection as a tool for teacher learning and growth (Atkins, 2005; Calderhead, 1989; Cole et al., 2022; Johns, 2004; Korthagen &

Nuijten, 2022; Slade et al., 2019). However, despite several identified good practices in preparing teachers to be reflective practitioners, general implementation gaps still prevail and systematic approaches towards the development of teachers' critical reflection are still lacking (Allas et al., 2016; Onnismäa, 2015).

Reflection is defined as a cognitive process which is carried through individually or with the aid of others to generate knowledge from various experiences (Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983). In the context of teacher education, the concept of reflection has its basis in Schön's "The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action" (1983), where he popularized the phrase "reflective practitioner". Critical reflection can be interpreted as critical thinking applied to personal and professional experiences (Cole et al., 2022). This happens when educators take a step back from an experience or a challenge and reflectively ask inquisitive questions to establish a purpose for particular happenings.

Russell (2018) argues that when practitioners participate in critical reflection activities, they succeed in narrowing the gap between theory and practice in the process of pensively questioning and reflecting on what they have learned, which, in turn, facilitates the implementation of changes into their practice. The process of critical reflection could potentially lead to great advantages: teachers become more confident in their classroom management skills and content delivery strategies (Slade et al., 2019), they can be more culturally inclusive (Butville et al., 2021; Carrington & Selva, 2010), they become aware of their core beliefs and hypothesis about teaching and learning, and encourage a positive learning environment (Brookfield, 1995).

This paper presents a detailed inquiry into the reflective practices of 10 experienced educational practitioners as they are in self-study of their teaching practices to discover how reflection in practice impacts their growth as teachers.

2. Methodology

The study's main aim is to investigate how reflection in practice is perceived by teachers concerning their growth as professionals. To accomplish this, the study is designed as a phenomenological approach, to grasp the meaning of individual situations in depth and to

look into what practitioners experienced, as the spotlight is on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). We collected qualitative data through a focus group and a structured reflective journal.

2.1. Research participants and sampling strategy

For the present investigation, the sample was selected based on the convenience sampling method (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The following criteria were used for the selection of the participants: more than 15 years of teaching experience (experienced teachers), tenure in an urban state school (Bucharest city), and willingness to take part in the study. Moreover, they should have not ever used a reflective journal or participated in a course on critical reflection. The study participants are primary school teachers complying with the above-mentioned criteria. In total, 10 practitioners participated in the study (all female, aged 38-55 years; average age 44).

In the sampling process's early phase, 25 primary school teachers were approached via email or telephone and described the details related to their upcoming contribution to the research process. Out of 25 practitioners, only 10 agreed to go ahead with the next stages of the study. A general description of the participants' background information is presented in Table No. 1.

Table no. 1. Background information of the participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Grade being taught
A1	38	Female	15	1 st
A2	40	Female	18	1 st
A3	51	Female	25	1 st
B1	55	Female	22	2 nd
B2	41	Female	18	2 nd
B3	40	Female	16	2 nd
C1	39	Female	16	3 rd
C2	42	Female	17	3 rd
D1	39	Female	15	4 th
D2	50	Female	22	4 th

The choice of selecting only experienced teachers (with over 15 years of teaching experience) was made based on McIntyre's study (1993),

which argued that reflection in practice represents a much more powerful means of learning for experienced practitioners than for beginning teachers, who have limited experience they can rely on when reflecting on the nature of the practices. McIntyre claimed that experienced practitioners do not need to be dependent on external sources of knowledge outside of their own experience, because they can always rely on an extensive repertoire of experiences that can guide their practice.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through a structured reflective journal for three months in the last two modules of the school year 2022-2023. To introduce practitioners to the notion of critical reflection, Smyth's (1989) model for personal and professional empowerment was chosen. This model of reflection was presented through a two-day course organized by the authors of the study. In this context, the teachers practiced the four-step process through reflections related to classroom examples. The teachers were asked to write in their reflective journals every two or three days (working days) about the issues or challenges they face in their day-to-day profession.

Smyth's (1989) model for personal and professional empowerment is a four-step process:

Figure no. 1. Smyth's (1989) model for personal and professional empowerment

Step 1 Describe:	‘What did I do?’ A detailed description of the issue or problem.
Step 2 Inform:	‘What does this mean?’ An examination of the issue or problem from multiple perspectives.
Step 3 Confront:	‘How did I come to be this way?’ An examination of assumptions related to the issue/problem in terms of contextual/political factors.
Step 4 Reconstruct:	‘How might I do things differently?’ Consideration of alternative views and future actions in relation to the issue or problem.

At the end of the school year, the teachers were invited to participate in focus group interviews (all the participants were present in the same room at the same time). The focus group lasted 125 minutes and the educators agreed to be audiotaped for a better analysis of their answers. This research method was chosen due to its potential to stimulate the sharing of information related to the experience of

reflecting on one's practices, as well as drawing upon feelings, beliefs, and reactions related to critical reflection in education. The focus group questions focused on the way practitioners perceived the experience of keeping a reflective journal, its benefits for their practice, as well as the lessons learned from regularly recording written information about their teaching.

3. Findings

After the analysis of the data was extracted from the focus groups, two main themes emerged: (1) a shift in perception about reflective practice, and (2) the impact of the use of reflection on teachers as professionals.

3.1. A shift in perception about reflective practice

Nine out of the 10 study participants reported that they were vaguely familiar with critical reflection, as they had heard of it in various contexts but never applied its principles in their practice. Most of them confessed that they had initial doubts when asked to participate in the study because they were not convinced that it would prove helpful to their classroom activities.

"To be honest, when you came to us, I was not so enthusiastic because I thought that this would be one of those experiments where you participate in something new and get to learn at least one new thing about you as a teacher. [...] I just participated out of pure curiosity, but not because I thought it would help me a lot in my profession." (A2)

"I was kind of skeptical in the beginning. I was almost sure that it would not have a big impact on me and on what I do at school." (D2)

Irrespective of their initial hesitations and distrust in the reflective practice model, all participants shifted their perception regarding the applicability and benefits of reflective practice from being slightly skeptical or uninterested to genuinely including reflection in their professional activity as an important tool for practice.

When required to ponder over the last three months of keeping a reflective journal, the experienced teachers characterized it as an eye-opening time in their professional lives, as they used adjectives such as "relevant", "powerful" or "effective".

"It was truly effective for my practice... I never used to apply the principals of reflection in my teaching before. But now I can see the many benefits that you can get from using it." (D1)

"I was pleasantly surprised by this experience. It was truly powerful to be able to analyze my practices and learn from them. I feel that I become a better teacher for my students. [...] I know that I have many things to learn even at my age, but I am glad that I discovered the benefits of reflection." (B1)

This change in perception is especially interesting to take note of, given the numerous comments they had made about believing that they consistently reflected before participating in the study and keeping a reflective journal. It is assumed that the turnaround happened because the use of Smyth's four-step process provided them with *more structure* and additional approaches to consider things that were already established. We believe that the use of the reflective framework enabled the practitioners to make use of reflection in more elaborate and profound ways. Having a structure can help them become more conscious of their experiences, as they purposefully inquire and critique their practice.

"I thought I used to reflect on my practices daily. This experience proved to me that I did not. I think I was just thinking about my activities in a non-structured way." (B3)

"The most valuable lesson, if I can say so, that these last few months have given me is that we always have to have a structure to rely on. Before I entered this journey with you, I never thought of reflecting on my day-to-day experiences by answering some basic questions." (C2)

"I've always reflected in one way or another about my classroom activities, but the experience of keeping a structured journal gave me a deeper understanding of myself. It is a different kind of reflection now..." (A2)

3.2. The impact of the use of reflection on teachers as professionals

Reflective journaling has been regarded by educators as having many benefits for their practice and their lives as professionals. The most commonly acknowledged advantages of regularly recording written information about their teaching were: the ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses as professionals, finding out what needs to be readjusted to reach the goals, developing a repertoire of appropriate strategies and techniques for teaching and classroom management, as well as coming to a realization about their convictions and assumptions about teaching and learning.

Below are some excerpts from the focus group interview:

"I think in a way that the journal works as a document in which you record your growth as an individual and professional. You cannot imagine how many things I discovered about myself when I read my journal entries for the last three months. [...] I found it truly inspiring..." (B3)

"Even if I have a few years under my belt as a teacher, I try to constantly ask myself if I can always meet my students' needs and if I can motivate them all the time, [...] if I can make a difference in their lives, even if they are still very little. I think keeping a journal can help a teacher in this regard a lot more than just thinking about it in an unstructured way." (B1)

"Before these structured reflective experiences, I did not have the opportunity to organize my thoughts in a way that helped me with my practice. I guess it is quite important to have guidance and support even when there are your own experiences, but framed differently." (A1)

This form of formative self-analysis was regarded as highly influential for teachers as learners of their craft. The consistent practice of reflective thinking is the key to making a significant change in one's practice and fostering reflective thinking as a habit of mind.

"I found this way of keeping track of your experiences interesting. [...] I would like to keep such a journal even when we will no longer be part of this study. It can be a very effective tool if you understand it and use it correctly." (A2)

"I promise to myself that I will at least try to always keep some type of reflective journal and try to write in it at the end of each school week. [...] As we all already know, the school experience can be sometimes quite... tumultuous... or chaotic, but I will try to consider taking a few minutes to ponder over my daily experiences." (B3)

"I encourage all teachers, irrespective of the grade they teach at, to become reflective teachers. For me it was a fulfilling and positive experience of learning about myself as a teacher and as a colleague." (D2)

4. Conclusions and discussion

The onus of promoting achievement among the pupils and meeting their learning needs falls primarily upon teachers, who are regarded as the final decision-makers in the matter of classroom practices. Being able to understand the complex nature of the classroom and tackle problems along the way is part of every practitioner's daily activity. The ability to pinpoint an issue's relevant features, identify possibilities for action, and assess the suitability of those actions is no simple task. Therefore, teachers need to be able to be aware of their previous practices and to constantly examine and assess their effectiveness, attitudes, and accomplishments. This awareness comes through the coherent and sustained practice of reflective thinking, in

which they can cultivate the habits of inquiry and reflection that are so much needed in the teachers' profession.

This paper presents a detailed inquiry into the reflective practices of 10 experienced educational practitioners as they are in self-study of their teaching practices with the goal to discover how reflection in practice impacts their growth as teachers. Before participating in the study and keeping a reflective journal, the practitioners were vaguely familiar with critical reflection, as they had heard of it in various contexts but never applied its principles in their daily practice. Nevertheless, despite their initial hesitations and distrust in the reflective practice model, all of the participants shifted their perception regarding the applicability and benefits of reflective practice from being slightly skeptical or uninterested to genuinely perceiving an important tool for practice. We believe that the use of the reflective framework enabled the practitioners to make use of reflection in more elaborate and profound ways. Having a structure can help teachers become more conscious of their experiences, as they purposefully inquire and critique their practice.

The potential benefits of deliberately engaging in reflective activities are the following, as recognized by the study participants: the ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses as professionals, finding out what needs to be readjusted to reach the goals, developing a repertoire of appropriate strategies and techniques for teaching and classroom management, as well as coming to a realization about their convictions and assumptions about teaching and learning, to name a few.

There is a raw power in the practice of reflective thinking and many studies have already demonstrated it (Brookfield, 1995; Butville et al., 2021; Carrington & Selva, 2010; Slade et al., 2019). By virtue of its complexity, the implementation of reflective practices should be done in structured environments, such as education programs for developing the reflective competencies of teachers (novices, as well as experienced ones). Merely "reporting" what transpired during the day does not qualify for critical reflection. Therefore, we stress the need to enable and equip teachers with reflective abilities from their initial training at the university level (also referred to as pre-service teacher education).

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