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The Reflective Practice - an Intrinsic Dimension of the Educational Demarche

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Abstract

The quality of the educational system, in general, and of the educational process, in particular, is reflected in the graduates' competences - cognitive and metacognitive, emotional, intercultural, civic competences - that enable them to successfully face with all the professional and social demands. In order to achieve such a goal, there is a need of teachers who are devoted to school, well-trained, enhanced with creativity, and always concerned of their own educational practices. The reflection on the didactic activity becomes a necessity, an intrinsic component, in order to promote a quality education. The teacher's reflective practice represents a conscious, assumed, responsible analysis of the didactic demarche, during and at its end, completed by informed decisions in terms of control and regulation, towards the achievement of the proposed educational objectives. At the level of the educational process, the benefits of the teacher's reflective practice are multiple: optimization of didactic design, didactic strategy and evaluation methodology, a better acquaintance of students, improvement of the pedagogical relationship with the class, identification of appropriate ways to develop students' competences, differentiation and individualization of training, facilitating a better understanding of the content transferred to students etc. This work aims to analyze the teachers' opinions on the reflective practice in strong relation to their didactic activities. The method used in the investigative approach was a questionnaire-based survey - its items were focused mainly on the necessity and benefits of the reflective practice, on the frequency recorded by the teachers engaged in the reflective practice, on the supported tools, but also on the relevant stages of the reflective practice.

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1. Introduction

“*Transforming a high-quality education into reality for all young people is a key concern for the future of Europe*” is mentioned in the European Commission Communication on *School Development and the excellent quality of teaching for a good start in life* [1: 13]. Assuming this concern, we are aware, from the beginning, that maximizing the impact of education on the individual development of each child, as well as on the social development in general, primarily asks the assurance of the quality of this process. *But in which aspects the quality of the educational process is reflected?* The first answer that we are tempted to formulate is, of course, the student’s performance. This can be an indicator of quality, but this is only one face of it. School outcomes are the expression of the combined action of some of the most important factors among teachers.

A good school provides quality educational services. Those who design, put into practice, evaluate those services are the teachers. Their professionalism, the extent to which they understand/are aware and assume their mission, their competences, their availability to reflect and constantly seek solutions to optimize their teaching demarches, are variables that condition the quality of the educational process as a whole.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. *The Reflective Practice - Conceptual Framework*

The term “reflective teaching” was used for the first time by John Dewey, who defined it as *engaging in processes such as permanent self-evaluation and self-development of the teacher*. It asks the teacher for flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness [2].

The *reflective practice* is defined, in the same mode, as “*an active, dynamic action-based and ethical set of skills, placed in real time a dealing with real, complex and difficult situations*” [3: 5].

Serra [4] defines *reflective teaching* as *a personal tool that the teacher can use to observe and evaluate his/her teaching behavior/teaching style*. Reflection can be a private process, but at the same time, it can be a process shared with other colleagues. According to the author, when the teacher collects information about what happened in the classroom and then reserves the time to

objectively analyze it, he/she can identify more aspects than what worked and what did not. Thus, the teacher can identify the principles and beliefs that define his/her teaching style. This kind of self-evaluation is a strong ally for the teacher, especially when changes in the way of teaching must occur.

In an operational definition, the reflective practice of the teacher represents *a conscious, profound, assumed, responsive analysis of the didactic activity, during and at the end of it, followed by informed decisions regarding its control and regulation, towards achieving the educational objectives.* [5]

2.2. Specific Stages of the Reflective Practice

The reflective practice of the teacher implies a complex approach, not at all easy, which can only be achieved by successively passing through some stages. Many authors present the stages that teachers have to go through when they engage in reflection on their own educational practices.

Zeichner and Liston describe five specific stages of reflective practice in which teachers can engage: *rapid reflection, repair, review, research, and retheorizing and reformulating.* [3: 4]

The first stage, the *rapid reflection*, refers to the *immediate, ongoing, automatic action of the teacher.* The *repair* stage involves *adopting the decision to change their own didactic behavior in response to the feed-back provided by students/preschool pupils.* The *review* consists of *analyzing, discussing or writing some evaluations/judgments about aspects specific to their own teaching style.* The fourth stage of reflective practice -*research* - involves *the practice of a more systematic and longer-lasting thought/reflection, sustained by documenting/collecting relevant scientific information.* The final stage - *retheorizing and reformulating* - aims to *critically examine their own practices and beliefs/conceptions from the perspective of pedagogical theories.*

Pollard [2: 18] wrote about the stages of reflective teaching, integrated into a cyclic model of reflective teaching (figure 1), with important practical implications. Thus, the steps to be taken by a reflective practitioner are: reflection, planning, prevision/formulate hypothesis, action, data collection, analysis, evaluation. After all the stages are completed, the cycle resumes.

Thus, in the author's opinion, a reflective teacher must first plan his/her activity, then formulate hypotheses and act. The reflective teaching cycle continues with the observation completed by collecting relevant data about their own activity, but also about the intentions, actions and emotions of their students. The data must then be critically analyzed and evaluated, so that they can be shared with other practitioners, lead to the issuing of

relevant value judgments, and the adoption of decisions with an impact on educational practice.

Finally, all the above-mentioned actions lead the teacher to review their own educational practice, to make plans and previsions, before starting a new phase of the educational process. The actions of the teacher consist in a dynamic process that has to go through successive cycles or through a spiral process and leads to quality teaching.

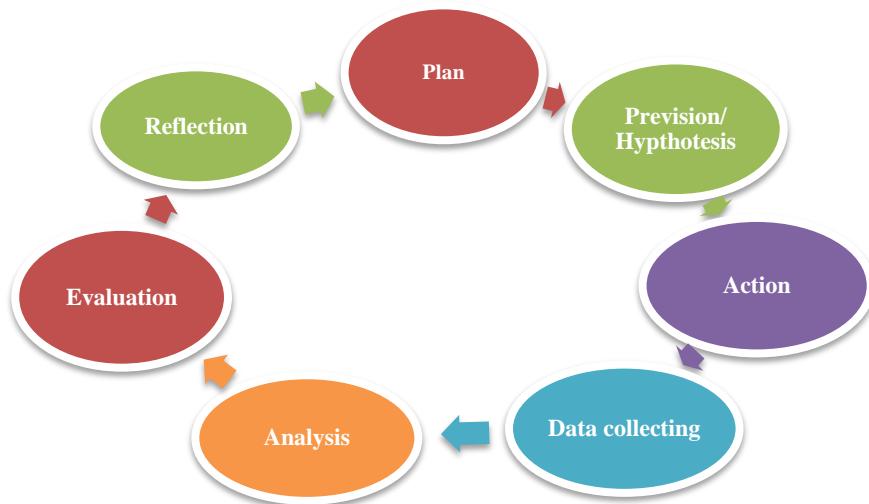


Figure 1. The model of reflective teaching [2 p18]

2.3. Being a Reflective Teacher

Reflection is the *sine qua non* condition for ensuring the quality of the educational process. Reflective practice gives the teacher the opportunity to objectively report to his or her own didactic demarche, trying to understand in depth every decision he/she has made during the course of his/her work, regarding his/her teaching style, regarding how to organize and transmit the content, the proposed didactic strategy, the formulated learning tasks, the relations developed with the students, or aspects related to didactic communication, aspects concerning each of the essential components of the educational process - teaching, learning, evaluation etc.

A good teacher will always be a reflective practitioner, concerned of improving his/her teaching competences, his/her teaching style, improving all the actions underlying an effective educational act or the actions related to the didactic design, the actual development of the lesson and its evaluation.

In the work entitled *Mindfulness for Teachers*, Jennings stated that “*by regularly practicing full awareness and applying it in our lives and our work, we begin to realize that we are not the victims of circumstances and that we have the power to change ourselves for good, as well as our classes and schools*” [6: 272-273]. The awareness is practically the result of the reflection, and this is more necessary as any teacher knows that he/she is a promoter of change, a change for better, being his/her constant involvement in a reflective demarche which can only be beneficial for his/her evolution in professional and personal plan, but also for the evolution of his/her students.

What are the principles/values/beliefs that guide a reflective teacher and what does he/she actually do? We will try to identify appropriate responses to those questions and outline a personality profile of the reflective teacher.

A reflective teacher knows, first of all, that he/she can be wrong, that his/her lessons are not perfect, but, also, that any teaching activity, is susceptible for being optimized. Mistakes are considered part of the learning process, because such a teacher is aware of the fact that at any time, he/she can learn something new or different from what he/she has already known, in order to improve his/her professional and transversal competences.

For a reflective teacher, identifying accurately his/her own strengths and weaknesses is a permanent goal. Having as a landmark his/her own vulnerabilities, which are recognized and accepted, he/she will be engaged in activities that can help eliminate/diminish them.

The personal pedagogical conception and the personal beliefs are also constantly subject of reflection, because the teacher is aware of the dynamics of theories, educational paradigms, the dynamics of dominant needs at certain school ages, of the changes from the level of the psychology of today's students, the changes which are influenced, of course, by the radical transformations of the contemporary society.

As Marzano mentioned - “*(...) the change in teachers' beliefs and behavior, which constitute their overall expectations, is a very difficult task*” [7: 283], but reflecting on them is the first step towards awareness and then change.

A reflective teacher shows openness to new, flexibility in thinking, a desire to do things better for himself/herself and for his/her students. In this respect, he/she capitalizes any opportunity that the school or the extra-curricular environment offers him/her to develop, in order to strengthen his/her feeling of self-efficacy.

Thus, assistances to the lessons coordinated by colleagues, face-to-face discussion, centered on issues specific to the educational learning environment, collaborating in virtual environments on professional platforms, use of instruments/methods designed to facilitate reflection - reflection journals, reflection sheets, video/audio recordings of lessons,

students and colleagues feed-back, action research etc. - represent concrete ways of practicing reflection and developing specific abilities.

In the process of integrating reflective practice into current educational approaches, the professional community has an important role to play. In a school where teachers learn together with their students, there will always be groups of reflection, which will ensure the sharing of experiences, dialogue, the dissemination of beliefs, values, the provision of a constructive feed-back, collaboration, teamwork for designing lessons compatible with the actual “measure” of each child.

To confirm the major role of teacher collaboration in optimizing teaching, referring to schools in Finland, Walker describes this process as follows: *“the teachers in my school did not only collaborate in the usual sense of the word, planning and teaching their lessons together, but they worked together in the true sense of the word, sharing the difficulties of teaching. They helped each other to find the teaching resources they needed for the next lesson. They discussed about better ways to support students with special needs. They analyzed the curriculum together. They were talking about how to improve the quality of the students’ breaks. Together they were giving mark on students’ tests. They offered each other technical assistance”* [8: 225-226].

In conclusion, a good teacher constant uses the reflection to ensure the depth of his/her own demarche of understanding and learning, guided by Drucker’s pertinent remarks: *“Effective action periods must be followed by moments of silence in which to reflect. Because of them you will be able to act even more efficiently”* [9: 65].

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The analysis of the opinions and perceptions of the teachers from pre-university education on reflection/reflective practice is the main purpose of this study.

The embraced investigative approach was shaped by the following questions: *Are the pre-university teachers engaged in each specific step of the reflective practice? Do they use appropriate tools to make a relevant reflection on teaching? In the context of reflective practice, are they aware of the importance of collaboration?*

Another goal was to identify - on the basis of the results of the micro-research carried out -, the extent to which training for the integration of reflective practice into the structure of the educational approach as an intrinsic dimension of it, is presumed as a training need specific to the majority of teachers from pre-university education, included in the sample of our investigative approach.

4. Research Methods

The research methods were based on a survey that exploited a designed questionnaire and a focus group.

The developed research instrument - a questionnaire for teachers from pre-university education - included both closed items and open items, with particular focus on issues, such as: the need and benefits of reflective practice; the engage of teachers in all relevant stages of reflective practice; the support instruments used for reflection; the frequency of specific reflective practice approaches; collaborating with other colleagues to carry out actions subsumed to reflective practice etc.

The processing of the obtained results was predominantly quantitative, in correlation with the qualitative analysis, based on the information obtained from discussions with the teachers included in the sample of the research. It consisted of 122 pre-university teachers from Dâmbovița County, teachers for pre-school, primary, secondary and high school education. The data obtained from the administration of the questionnaires and those recorded in the focus group were analyzed in quantitative and qualitative ways, which led to the following interpretations.

5. Findings

One of the relevant items of the questionnaire was the extent to which teachers are engaged in each specific stage of the reflective practice.

The centralization of the resulted data highlights the following aspects (Table 1):

- if in the first stages specific to the reflective practice - rapid reflection, repair, review -, 50% of the questioned teachers are engaged *to a very great extent* and *to a great extent*. In the following stages, which are based on a higher motivation of teachers, on certain types of developed/consolidated competences, especially as a result of constant investment in their own professional development, their percentage drops by about 10%;
- the sample of the teachers included in the research positions themselves according to “expectations” and demonstrates the constant interest on improving the educational process which must obviously be taken into consideration, given that, especially in the last decade, the phrase “education quality” as a leitmotiv, a reference, at least at the level of discourse, for all the school people.

To make an effective reflection on teaching, teachers need to use a range of appropriate methods, techniques and instruments. For this aim, we asked the respondents to specify which of the presented instruments are most often used when they reflect on their own educational practices (figure 2).

Table 1. Teachers' perception about their own engagement in specific stages of the reflective practice

The stages of reflection	The extend in which the teachers are engaged in each stage of the reflective practice				
	To a very great extent	To a great extent	To a moderate extent	To small extent	To a very small extent
Rapid reflection	25%	30%	35%	9%	1%
Repair	23%	29%	37%	10%	1%
Review	21%	31%	36%	12%	0%
Research	15%	28%	49%	6%	2%
Retheorizing and reformulating	15%	25%	51%	5%	4%

Thus, 34% of the surveyed teachers expressed that they used, first of all, observation sheets prepared by the director or colleagues in the Methodological Commission, and 32% used the students' feed-back questionnaires.

We can observe that a higher percentage of the teachers, used in the reflection practice, instruments developed by other practitioners *to a greater extent* than their own instruments (16% reflection sheets, 5% reflection journals). This can be correlated with a low level of competence specific to a research-action approach, whereby teachers can develop themselves appropriate tools to monitor the different aspects of the educational process.

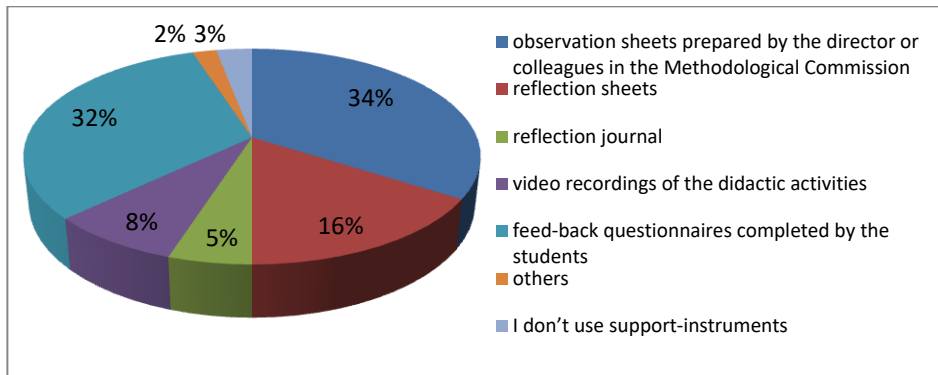


Figure 2. Supporting instruments used in the reflection on didactic activity.

We know that discussions and collaboration with other teachers from school are very important for reflective practice, because the exchange of ideas and the experiences of others can help teachers improve their didactic activity, find solutions to the problems they face in the classroom (figure 3).

Being asked about the frequency of discussions with other colleagues about the didactic activities, 24% of teachers said they talked *always* with other teachers, and 47% *often*. Therefore, in a consistent percentage, the questioned teachers valued collaboration with others in the process of the reflection on educational practices.

However, it is worrying the percentage of the respondents (24%) who said they never started or did not promote discussions about the assumed didactic steps. Analyzing the information obtained from the focus group we can justify those answers either through a high level of perceived self-efficacy or by installing a self-sufficiency state. It is obvious that both situations are harmful. If we relate to the first situation - the perceived self-efficacy, even if some of the teachers considered that they have the resources to identify solutions to the specific problems of the educational environment, there is no argument to explain their refusal to share with other colleagues' personal experiences. As regards the state of self-sufficiency, it is incompatible with the status of teacher. Each good teacher realizes that the profession is bound to continuous investment of effort, time, cognitive, affective-motivational and action resources in the process of professional and personal development.

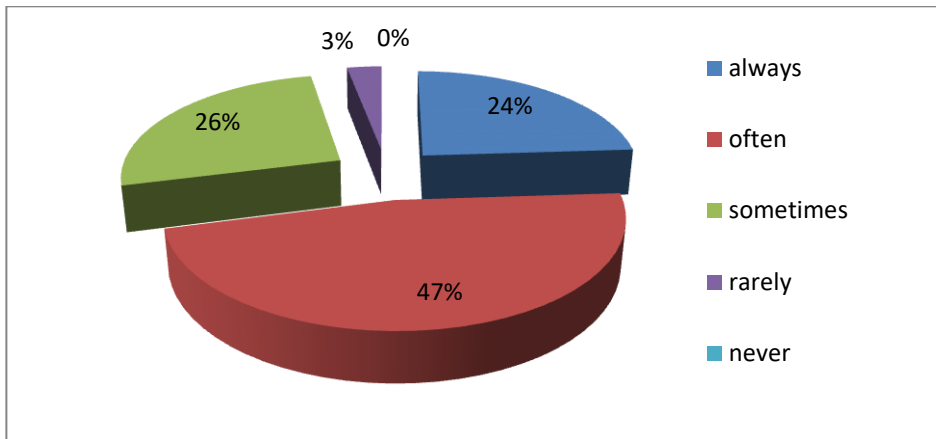


Figure 3. Discussions with other colleagues from school about the didactic activities.

6. Discussions

As part of our investigative approach, we have identified a number of limits, including:

- the administration of the questionnaires on a small sample of pre-university education teachers limits the possibility of extrapolating the obtained results;
- the composition of the sample of the research, mainly questioning the teachers participating in specific professional development activities - continuous training programs, training sessions for the support of the didactic degree (exam II) etc. - influenced the answers to a significant extent, “deforming” the existent situation in the classroom in this way;
- the inclusion, in the questionnaire, of personal identity data (gender, age, educational background, didactic degree, the school where they work) affected the objectivity of the information provided by the research subjects.

However, analyzing with lucidity all those limits of our micro-research, we believe that the data, based on the administered questionnaire and the focus group, ensured the formation of a relevant image of how pre-university teachers integrate reflective practice in current educational approaches.

7. Conclusions

The analysis and interpretation of the data obtained in the investigative study, led us to the following concluding ideas:

- the reflective practice represents, in the perception of the majority of questioned teachers, an important dimension of the educational demarche;
- in a percent of about 50%, teachers are engaged - *to a very great extent* and *to a great extent* - in actions of reflection, remediation and review of their own didactic behaviors and teaching style, being aware of those main variables of the educational activity which they can control and regulate, in order to optimize the learning outcomes;
- a lower number of respondents are engaged in research-action, retheorizing and reformulation, which can be explained by inadequate psycho-pedagogical and research competences, by a low motivation for such actions requiring time investment and effort, as well as the lack of a comprehensive approach to teaching;
- the answers provided by the teachers to the items concerning the used instruments and the collaboration with other colleagues, in the context of reflective practice, confirms, to a certain extent, the results recorded in the first item of the analysis. Thus, we note that, in particular, the instruments which its application is mandatory (because they are distributed by the manager of the educational institution, the responsible for methodical commissions etc., or are required for other purposes - e.g. ARACIP evaluations), and less instruments created by the teachers themselves to facilitate their reflection on the teaching activity.

Synthesizing, we appreciate that only through a reflective practice consistently associated with any approach undertaken by the teacher, the teacher can identify both the strengths and malfunctions of the educational process at the micro level, and can act as a regulator, adopting the most effective decisions/measures for improvement/optimization.

The reflective practice involves the formation/development of some skills that are needed to be integrated into the “*archive of the competences of a good teacher*”, ensuring both the efficiency of the educational work and, on the other hand, impacting the students’ school performances and, their optimal insertion into the socio-professional field. For this reason, correlated with the results of the micro-research carried out, we believe that the teacher training for approaching reflective practice as an intrinsic dimension of the educational act, has to become a main objective of the initial and continuing training programs for the teaching profession.

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