

The main benefits and challenges of implementing a guided reflection procedure as perceived by student teachers and teachers

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Summary

Our society is rapidly changing and this requires professionals to continually redevelop their skills, knowledge and attitudes. These ever-changing circumstances set new expectations for teachers - they are expected to help children become future professionals who are able to adapt to unexpected societal expectations (OECD, 2019). Thus, there is an increasing focus on teachers' continuous professional development and the search for evidence-based approaches to support teachers (European Commission, 2015; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; OECD, 2019). Additionally, it must be borne in mind that the teaching staff is becoming more heterogeneous, which means that teachers in need of support are very different in terms of their preparation and hence their needs (OECD, 2019). Therefore, there is a need to find methods that could be beneficial for teachers at different stages of their professional development. Although educational researchers agree that reflection is an integral part of teacher professional development (Caena, 2011), further research is needed to find a method that is effective in supporting different teachers. This article aims to describe how teachers at different stages of their professional development perceive the benefits and disadvantages of a guided reflection procedure (Allas et al., 2017).

Development is determined as a process that results in qualitative changes in the psyche as a whole (Körgešaar, 2016; Toomela, 2016). In the context of supporting teachers, the terms *teacher professional development* and *continuous professional development* are emphasised. It is indicated that continuous professional development supports the teachers' ability to cope on a daily basis (OECD, 2015; Timperley, 2008), but it is not explained what kind of changes will occur during the development. Evans (2002) has defined teacher development as a process that can be internally or externally driven and that can improve the status of the teaching profession and the knowledge, skills, and

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practices of teachers. She distinguishes between two fundamental components of teacher development that express the focus of changes: 1) attitude-related development that changes teachers' attitudes toward work; 2) activity-related development that improves teacher's professional practice. This definition provides a framework for understanding the teacher's professional development, but there is still a need to define universally applicable features of the teacher's professional development process to describe how teachers move from one level to another.

Berliner (1988) has identified the following features in defining teacher professional development as a process: 1) classroom perception, interpretation, and prediction; 2) distinguishing significant events; 3) use of routines; 4) responsibility for one's actions. During different stages of their professional development, teachers need specific support in relation to these features. During the early stages, external support is necessary to initiate careful examination of one's own teaching, for identifying typical characteristics of teaching and acquiring the initial teaching skills (Berliner, 2004). Through constant meaning-making of their experiences, teachers acquire a better perception of the classroom, learn to interpret classroom events and to use what was learnt previously to predict and manage their future actions. Teachers begin to construct integrated knowledge systems from which knowledge is more easily retrieved. Accordingly, teachers become more flexible in their teaching as some routinisation of everyday repetitive actions occur (Berliner, 2004). Additionally, teachers learn to take more control of their own actions and more responsibilities for supporting their students' learning. During the later stages, teachers need opportunities to guide their development and ways to learn from everyday classroom practice (Borko et al., 2010). Furthermore, Simons and Ruijters (2014) emphasise the importance of actively maintaining the theory of teaching and keeping it up-to-date and connecting it to classroom practice that in turn contributes to teacher authority and autonomy.

Previous studies make clear that giving meaning to one's own practical experiences and interpreting these in the light of existing and new knowledge is at the centre of supporting teachers at different stages of their professional development, which suggests that reflection is the most important way to support teachers. Reflection refers to the cognitive process that aims to construct knowledge based on practical experiences individually or with the support of others (Dewey, 1933; Korthagen, 2004; Schön, 1983). Therefore, carefully designed reflection assignments could be beneficial to support teachers at the different stages of their professional development.

In this study, feedback from 21 student teachers and 80 teachers were collected and analysed to describe how teachers at different stages of their

professional development perceive the benefits and disadvantages of the guided reflection procedure (Allas et al., 2017). All participants carried out the procedure that consisted of four stages: 1) filming one's own teaching, 2) selecting two meaningful events (one empowering, one challenging), 3) carrying out oral reflection on the selected events; and 4) writing a reflection on the selected and discussed events. Semi-structured group interviews and group discussions were implemented to collect participants' feedback and thematic content analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) was used to evaluate the data, and investigator triangulation was carried out to ensure the trustworthiness of the data interpretation (Denzin, 1978).

The results of the study suggest that, in general, different teachers found the procedure to be beneficial. This result is important because one of the concerns related to enhancing teachers' continuous professional development is that teachers do not perceive the methods offered to support their everyday practice as useful (Borko et al., 2010; OECD, 2009). If teachers perceive the supportive methods as potentially beneficial for enhancing their everyday teaching, they are more motivated to contribute to these activities.

Additionally, the results indicate that the guided reflection procedure enabled teachers with varying degrees of experience, expectations and needs, to utilise the different supportive aspects that were integrated into the procedure to enhance reflection. More precisely, teachers with less experience were able to use the video recording of their own teaching, the guiding questions and external support from a peer or supervisor to identify the typical characteristics of teaching, to become accustomed to interpret the situations from different perspectives and to learn from their experiences to use the constructed knowledge to guide their future actions (Berliner, 2004). At the same time, the teaching video and the opportunity to select meaningful events allowed experienced teachers to take the initiative in designing their own development, to base learning on their everyday setting and to focus on student learning. Similarly, the opportunity to carry out an oral reflection with a colleague enabled them to organise their thoughts and knowledge and to notice the relationship between their activities and student learning (Gellert, 2008; Timperley, 2008).

Moreover, the results indicate that the procedure guided teachers to move beyond what was expected from them at their professional development stage. More specifically, the guided reflection procedure broadened less experienced teachers' focus and encouraged them to notice aspects related to students and their learning that is more common to experienced teachers (Fuller, 1969). At the same time, the procedure directed experienced teachers to take a closer look at themselves as teachers, at their strengths, and to recognise the aspects that they succeed in which is less common as experienced teachers appear

to be reflective mainly when something is not proceeding according to plan (Berliner, 2004).

Furthermore, the results highlight an important concern related to supporting teachers at the different stages of their professional development. More precisely, teachers with different experiences expressed difficulties with integrating their theoretical knowledge with their practical experiences. Novice teachers stated that they had insufficient theoretical knowledge in order to give meaning to their specific meaningful events. Experienced teachers, on the other hand, were concerned about the relevance of their theoretical knowledge since the field of educational theory expands rapidly. Moreover, teachers at different stages of their development expressed uncertainty regarding finding new theoretical knowledge. This result is remarkable as it is an important characteristic of a professional to constantly renew one's body of theory to be able to take evidence-based decisions (Leijen et al., 2019; Pedaste et al., 2019; Simons & Ruijters, 2014).

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that teachers at different stages of their professional development perceive the guided reflection procedure as useful. At the same time, the study reveals the need to support teachers in connecting their theoretical knowledge to their practical experiences.

Keywords: guided reflection procedure, teacher's professional development, reflection