

How Teachers Experience Practical Reflectivity in Schools: A Case Study

Alcina Oliveira Martins^{1,3,*}, Maria Nazaré Coimbra^{1,3}, Isabel P. Pinto^{1,3}, Rosa Serradas^{2,3}

¹School of Psychology, Education and Sports, Lusofona University of Oporto, Porto, Portugal

²School of Social Sciences, Education and Management, Lusofona University of Humanities and Technologies, Lisbon, Portugal

³Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Education and Development (CeIED)

*Corresponding author: amom@ulp.pt

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Abstract The aim of this study is to analyze the essential capacities and attitudes of teachers concerning the concretization of teacher's reflective practices, by considering potentialities and constraints through the perceptions of teachers and supervisors, in a public school in Porto, Portugal. In the case study, a mixed research strategy was used, with the application of an enquiry questionnaire to basic school teachers, as well as interviews to their supervisors. The results show the importance of practical reflectivity and teachers' collaborative work, based on continuous learning. As constraints, supervisors draw attention to a discontinuous reflection, limited to the initial moment of activity planning. On the other hand, teachers point out the problem of being overloaded by school daily tasks and a superficial evaluation of practices, which hinder the deepening of practical reflectivity.

Keywords: *reflective teacher, teacher practices, potentialities and constraints, case study*

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1. Introduction

Teachers are facing new demands and complex challenges pertaining to the social, cultural and political changes that have occurred in recent years. This implies a critical reflection by teachers about their daily practices.

The evolution of concepts and supervision practice itself tend to be, increasingly, the purpose of teachers' professional development. This development is guided by reflective teaching, with the purpose of improving performance, through the continuous training of collaborative work between colleagues. It is focused on the promotion of students' learning, as well as the teachers' own development [1].

The training of teachers is directly related to personal, professional and organizational development. Therefore, it is essential to the emergence of a professional and organizational culture within the schools [2]. As a consequence, an attempt is being made to deepen the reflection on the importance of teaching practice and continuous training. Practical reflectivity is a crucial engine in the construction of a dynamic process which provides teachers with autonomous thinking and professional identity.

Introducing a reflective practice within the school and into teachers' work implies that teachers should dominate cognitive and metacognitive skills. These are essential not only as a support in the act of criticizing their practice, embedded beliefs and principles, but also in understanding

the context where it is developed and the benefits they can have in their performance.

The complexity of a reflective process, focused on the classroom and the community, justifies the present study on practical reflectivity in schools and professional growth of teachers, through collective work which is shared between pairs.

2. Teacher's Reflectivity

The search for more efficiency in the professional performance of teachers has led to a constant (re)formulation of their role, level of responsibility and missions attached to it. Reflective teaching is vital to this complex and multifaceted process. The concepts of 'reflection-in-action', 'reflection-on-action' and 'reflective practitioner' were first introduced by Donald Schön in 1983, in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*.

Reflection refers to an activity in which an experience is recalled. It is a response that involves the conscious recall and examination of experiences, as a basis for evaluation and as a source for planning and action [3]. However, experience alone is not sufficient for professional improvement. Experience combined with reflection, on the other hand, is a powerful tool for the teachers' professional development. Exploring their own teaching through critical reflectivity, teachers can develop awareness and change, which benefit their professional growth [4].

The reflective approach is the ability to (re)build and (re)elaborate creatively the pathways of pedagogical actions. It implies paying attention to routine practices, which, through reflection, assume a different meaning, or are perceived under a new light. Reflectivity promotes the 'artistry' of Schön [3], which means inserting the sensibility of the artist in teaching. It is a reflection-in-action, allowing professionals to develop and progress their training and knowledge of themselves and their actions [5].

Schön [3,6] identified ways in which professionals, as 'reflective practitioners', could become aware of their knowledge and learn from their experience and *reflection*. One of his most important contributions was establishing a clear distinction between two types of reflection used in the field of education: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

To Schön, reflection-in-action is private, very fast and intuitive. It takes place in the context itself and works as a self-correction tool, tending to focus interactively on the action, its outcomes, and the intuitive knowledge implicit in it [7]. By reflecting in action, a teacher can become a researcher in the context of his practice, improving it and deepening his or her professional knowledge. As a researcher, the teacher does not separate teaching and experimentation from implementation, because implementation is built on permanent enquiring. Reflection-in-action can often take place in situations of uncertainty [5].

Reflection-on-action happens afterwards, focusing on intentional improvement. In reflection-on-action, teachers consciously review, analyze and evaluate their practices, with the intention of gaining insight to improve these practices.

Reflection implies undertaking an attempt to analyze carefully the consequences of teaching strategies and to elaborate different hypotheses, in order to find the most suitable and consistent solution. It also implies anticipating results through the interpretation of actions and their consequences. Reflective teachers have the task of finding and recognizing the issues for which there is no immediate or simple answer in the classroom. This leads teachers to enquire, investigate and search for possible answers. Such posture is intrinsic to professionals, who seek a reflective practice and recognize that they do not have all the answers, while retaining the necessary self-confidence to risk a new approach [8,9].

One of the most important aspects of reflection through practice is that teachers are not just looking back to their past actions, but also to their emotions, experiences and answers. These are added to existing knowledge, so as to build new knowledge to be shared in *schools as learning communities*.

The school is not an isolated place in relation to its environment. We belong to a society that is constantly undergoing transformations. The school needs the capacity of renovating and adapting to these changes, in order to improve the quality of teaching and make it more approachable in the interaction with the world. The reflective school must provide a connection between the work in the classroom and the real world [10].

There are good reasons for teachers to reflect on their practice: firstly, while some practices might be convenient in the short term, they will not help students to learn

effectively in the long term; secondly, professionals do not teach in a vacuum, they are products of personal and social circumstances that affect what they do and how they think. Therefore, the school, as a learning community, has the responsibility to promote the social, personal and educational development of learners and their educational success [11,12].

3. Methodology

The aim of this case study is to analyze the essential capacities and attitudes of teachers, towards the concretization of reflective practices, considering their potentialities and constraints. It is based on the perception of teachers and supervisors, in a public school in Porto, Portugal.

As Yin point out [13], a 'case study' is an empirical inquiry that investigates social phenomena within its real-life context, considering the boundaries between phenomenon and context, and multiple sources of evidence. In this case study, centered in a single school community, and bounded by space and time findings, a mixed research strategy was applied.

Although case studies rely mainly on qualitative methods, multiple sources of data and multiple data collection methods are likely to be used as well [14]. The purpose of using a mixed research strategy is to intertwine both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a single study [15], to develop as full an understanding of this case as possible. Sequential strategic procedures were thus applied, in order to achieve proper 'data triangulation', as suggested by Creswell [16] for this kind of methodological approach. In this way, we were able to combine the more structured approach of statistics with the descriptive information provided by semi-structured interviews. Data collection occurred during the 2013-2014 school year, using a deliberate or 'purposive sampling' [14] of fifty-two teachers and supervisors working in the same basic school.

This case study was carried out in *two stages*. Firstly, quantitative data was gathered and analyzed, using questionnaires applied to the forty-eight teachers of the school whose practices had recently been observed and evaluated by supervisors. Secondly, we examined the discourse of four of the six school supervisors (two did not agree to be interviewed), looking for categories. These categories were based on attitudes and skills for a reflective teaching, as reported in the literature review. Moreover, subcategories were grouped under each topic, as subsets of the categories [13,17]. The supervisors were given the opportunity to read their own transcribed interview, so as to verify the accuracy of the data.

The case study is circumscribed to a specific and unique situation of teachers' supervision, seeking a deep understanding of this special context [18]. The selection of the school is justified by its outstanding position in the promotion of training experiences, but even more so by its projects and training courses. In its Educational Project, the school reinforces the objective of continuous and reflective teacher training, in order to achieve better teaching and learning quality, and the educational success of the students.

3.1. The Participants

Concerning the characterization of the teachers and the supervisors, we verify that they are predominantly female, and between forty and fifty years of age. They have been working at this school for 10 years or more. Additionally, the supervisors accumulate teaching and supervision duties in the same school. Their task includes classroom-based supervision as a cyclical process, creating readiness through supportive and positive communication with teachers. This implies continuous inquiry about teacher performance, encouraging teachers to consciously reflect upon and inquire into their practice, and an overall evaluation of the process [19,20].

It is understood that the participants in the case study have a stable professional situation and know the educational context in analysis well, a criteria for participation in this study. Their professional stability, both as teachers and as supervisors is a factor to take into account, since it influences their work [15].

3.2. Analysis of the Questionnaire Enquiry to Teachers

The totality of teachers (100%) says that reflective practices are essential in the classroom, since they contribute to the quality of teaching and learning, through investigation-action. Most consider themselves reflective professionals, presenting, as justification, by decreasing order, reflection before, during and after action, the reformulation of the practices and collaborative reflection in pairs. Due to the extension of the study, we present a set of three representative tables.

Table 1. Characteristics of reflective teachers

Reflective characteristics	n	%
Capacity to reflect before, during and after the action	15	31.2%
Capacity to investigate practices	10	20.8%
Capacity to reformulate the practices	7	14.6%
Capacity of pedagogic-didactic actualization	5	10.4%
Capacity to invest in continuous training	4	8.3%
Participation in collaborative reflection between pairs	3	6.3%
Promotion of collaborative work in the community	3	6.3%
Process evaluation of the practices	1	2.1%
Total	48	100%

Concerning the characteristics that compose the reflective teacher profile, the results are reported in Table 1. As we can see, teachers consider, as the most important characteristic of the reflective teacher, the capacity to reflect before, during and after the action (31.2%), the capacity to investigate practices (20.8%) and to reformulate them (14.6%). However, the collaborative reflection in pairs seems detached from why they consider themselves reflective professionals (6.3%), with collaborative work in the community also being less chosen (6.3%). Such results point out the ongoing predominance of individualized teacher work, in spite of the awareness of the advantages of practical reflectivity and collaboration in pairs. The pedagogic-didactic actualization (10.4%) and the investment in continuous training (8.3%), although with less meaningful results, are seen as the basis of teacher work. Finally, the process evaluation of the practices is mentioned only by one teacher only (2.1%), and thus not seen as a systematic

support for the reflection and educational investigation, in the educational context.

In general, teachers understand the profile of a reflective professional, as described by Zeichner [12], Schön [6] and Perrenoud [1]. However, it is clear that an effective interconnection between theory and practice is lacking. It would be interesting to know which obstacles exist to the concretization of reflective practices, with the training and performance of teachers in mind.

The results appear in Table 2.

Table 2. Constrains to the concretization of reflective practices

Constrains to the concretization of reflective practices.	n	%
Overload due to bureaucratic tasks	28	58.3%
Lack of time for joint reflection	10	20.8%
Individualization of teacher's work	8	16.7%
Insufficient continuous training	2	4.2%
Total	48	100%

Concerning to the constraints to the concretization of reflective practices, teachers' answers point out an overload due to bureaucratic tasks (58.3%), and lack of time for joint reflection (20.8%). Given the relation of causality between both, it is evident that management work teachers undertake, in the school as an organization, is seen as preventing a deepening of the pedagogic-didactic intervention and, more concretely, of reflective work in pairs. With regard to the individualization of teachers' work (16.7%), teachers understand it as a hindrance to the improvement of reflective practices. However, compared to the results of the preceding table, the fact that collaborative reflection between pairs, and collaborative work in the community have been pointed out as reflective characteristics by only a few teachers shows the difficulty in letting go of old practices related to individual work. Insufficient continuous training (4.2%) is the result, in the context of the study. This happens in spite of clear reinforcement in teacher training, announced in the Educational Project, as described in the contextualization of this study.

Table 3. Potentialities of the concretization of reflective practices

Potentialities of the reflective practices	n	%
Questioning of practices through reflection	12	25.0%
Improvement of teaching methods	9	18.7%
Collaborative reflection between pairs	8	16.7%
Reformulation of practices	8	16.7%
Promotion of investigation-action	7	14.6%
Improvement of professional skills	4	8.3%
Total	48	100%

In what concerns the potentialities of the concretization of reflective practice, the answers of the teachers are elucidative either of their perceptions, or of the educative work developed at the school community.

The questioning of practices through reflection stands out (25.0%). It is followed by the improvement of teaching methods (18.7%), collaborative reflection between pairs (16.7%) reformulation of practices (16.7%) and the promotion of investigation-action (14.6%). These potentialities show teachers as capable of investigating, reflecting and changing pedagogic action in different groups or classes, thus matching the literature review. However, once more, the collaborative reflection between pairs, mentioned by some teachers, is not always achieved, according to the results analyzed in the Table 3. Teachers

have the perception of their importance, but they seldom perform a collaborative work in the community.

Finally, although the improvement of professional capacities (8.3%) has been mentioned by few teachers, it is implicit in their path of professional learning, linking reflection, collaboration, educative action and continuous learning.

3.3. Analysis of the Interview to Supervisors

The interview to the four supervisors began with an auto-characterization of their duties, as internal supervisors of the school. All believe that they follow the educative practices, by motivating teachers to assume a reflective and transforming attitude in the learning community.

The categorical analysis is based on defined *a priori* categories, from an adaptation of the theories of Zeichner [12], Schön [6] and Perrenoud [1]. It includes the following categories: (1) receptivity to the reflective practice; (2) responsibility in reflective practices; (3) commitment in reflective practices. Afterwards, the semantic analysis of the discourse [13,17], and the systematization of the interviews of the supervisors were undertaken. The counting of the occurrences is in Table 4.

Table 4. Capacities and attitudes of the reflective teacher

Categories	Subcategories	Oc.
1. Receptivity to reflective practices	Openness to educative innovation	5
	Openness to reflective practice	6
	Integration of reflection into practice	4
	Acceptance of the possibility of making mistakes	3
2. Responsibility in reflective practices	Reflection before the action	6
	Reflection during the action	3
	Reflection after the action	4
	Concretization of meta reflection	3
	Continuous evaluation of the practice	3
3. Commitment in reflective practices	Concretization of collaborative reflective practices	5
	Capacity for improving practices	4
	Capacity for auto and hetero training	7

Subtitle: Oc. – Occurrence.

In the first category, receptivity to the reflective practice, the most significant subcategory is openness to reflective practice (6 occurrences). The prominence of this subcategory matches the teachers' answers, as previously analyzed. In lesser numbers, there is the openness to educative innovation (5) and the integration of reflection into practice (4). The acceptance of the possibility of making mistakes (3) is only mentioned by the supervisors, who consider that teacher supervision and evaluation practices can improve the process of building knowledge. In the perception of supervisors, mistakes can be a source of learning, when they are a basis for reflection. Besides that, criticism among pairs can lead to greater improvement. As Perrenoud (1999) says, no one learns neither evolves without making mistakes, since they are a necessary path for knowledge.

As one of the supervisors says:

Sup.2: "Teachers are receptive to reflective practices and to their integration in their daily teachers work. However, at the level of internal supervision usually done by the coordinator of the curricular area, it is not easy to reflect on accomplished work. From my experience, it is

always difficult when criticisms are made to pedagogical action (...). Teachers still have problems in accepting criticism from a colleague who works in the same school, accumulating supervisor duties."

The discourse evidences the dilemma of internal supervisors that simultaneously perform teacher and supervisor duties. Interpersonal relationships of proximity make the formulation and the acceptance of reflections and constructive critics more difficult. Therefore, it is not possible to make reflective practices advantageous, as there is not a true understanding of the strong and weak points. This prevents the reformulation of the practice, inseparable from the hetero and auto reflection.

Regarding the second category (responsibility in the reflective practice) the supervisors consider that teachers reflect the most before action (6 occurrences), when planning school activities. However, it is important this reflection decreases after (4) and during the action (3), confirming the necessity of a continuous reflection process, which many teachers still do not perform. Accordingly, meta reflection (3) and the continuous evaluation of the practice (3) do not always take place into practice, which decreases the learning and teaching quality.

As supervisors describe:

Sup.1: "Yes, teachers reflect about the practices, but they still do it in a poorly organized way. They are able to reflect before the action, in the planning of the activities, which is done in a collaboration with all the teachers at the same school year and curricular subject. The collaborative work of planning is already well understood. The problem is with reflection, during and after action, which is not always done. So, as supervisor, my opinion is that reflection about teaching implies a continuous auto regulation, remains unfinished and not always is concretized."

Sup.2: "Teachers know that the true reflective teacher applies practical reflectivity during all teaching and learning process, in planning, concretization in the classroom and evaluation after action. But in practice many teachers work together only in planning, and they do not do it during the action."

Both supervisors point out, as constraints to the concretization of reflective practice, the poorly organized reflection, discontinuous and incomplete, performed by many teachers. Concerning the reflection process, teachers focus on the planning stage, forgetting the concretization of didactic planning and the corresponding evaluation, as we can see from the results of the questionnaire to the teachers. As such, they are not used to reflect upon the effectiveness of their performance, or solving possible problems with the subsequent reformulation of practices.

Finally, regarding the third category, commitment in reflective practices, collaborative work on the capacity of auto and hetero training prevails (7 occurrences), as well as the concretization of collaborative reflective practices (5). The supervisors agree that, through collaborative work, teachers develop their capacity for improving reflection, as seen by the teachers in the questionnaire, is not always taken into account, in detriment of the valorization of personal work.

In order to clarify this subject, we present the following extracts:

Sup.1: “Training is essential, in order to obtain a responsible, participant and dynamic teacher. In a school that privileges the training of reflective teachers and community work, supervision work is facilitated”.

Sup.3: “The reflection is indeed important for professional actualization and training. It is in shared reflection that we can find paths that facilitate didactic and pedagogic processes (...). Only practical reflectivity allows reformulation of pedagogical practice, as well as the students’ success”.

Sup.4: “It is essential that teachers improve their professional capacities and share between them the acquisition of capacities suitable for a genuine reflective teacher. It is a process that takes time (...). But it is necessary to be a reflective teacher, above all in basic school, an educational stage essential for the development of our students. For that, the teacher has to be committed, in order to achieve a work of quality.”

For the supervisors, the profile of the reflective teacher is built from the diligence and motivation of teachers in a “process that takes time” (Sup. 4). After all, reflection is a process, and not a sum of unsystematic phases limited to the planning of the activities, the only moment in which some teachers perform reflective and collaborative work. In this way, the supervisors highlight the importance of collaborative work in pairs. In accordance, the school in which the case study took place “privileges the training of reflective teachers and the community work” (Sup.1).

4. Conclusions

When looking at the study findings, it can be said that teachers and supervisors agree on the importance given to the development of capacities and attitudes necessary to the concretization of reflective practices. Teachers emphasize the capacity to reflect during action, investigating practices and reformulating them, when necessary. However, reflection is superficial and unmethodical, circumscribed to planning, as pointed out by the supervisors. This tendency is aggravated by an evaluation less meaningful of the practices, referred by the teachers, who show less acceptance of the possibility of mistaking, as pointed out by the supervisors.

The same happens with collaborative work. While teachers, in theory, value pair work, in practice they frequently prefer individual work. This dichotomy delays a systematic meta reflection to enhance responsibility and investment in reflective practices. To these situations, identified by supervisors, another is added: the overload of daily school tasks, with consequent lack of time for reflective practices, as mentioned by teachers. From these results, we infer that the participants in this case study have a clear perception of the collective and individual transformation that occur, as consequence of a reflective interaction between pairs.

Finally, overall findings point to the beneficial impact that reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action have on teachers’ practical reflexivity. Critical systematic reflection is a necessary condition for quality teaching. The participants believe that reflection can promote construction of professional development, based on a prospective vision of continuous learning and on the consolidation of a school community that privileges

reflective and collaborative work. In the construction of a dynamic educative community, systematic reflection is seen as a crucial condition for quality teaching. A culture of reflection and inquiry into teaching is anchored in the specificity of a school that believes in their teachers as ‘reflective practitioners’ [3].

Although the conclusions of this particular case study cannot be generalized [13], since it is unique in its complexity and context, a ‘naturalistic generalization’ is possible [17], furthered by other case studies and individual experiences. This is particular important when teacher supervision and reflection are involved, since it is a problematic and challenging area.

Hence, future research is needed, considering the impact of the supervisory roles in teachers’ practical reflectivity, depending on each school context. This area is suitable for practical consideration and future research, due to the active participation of supervisors in building professional learning school communities, through ongoing problem-solving and practical reflectivity.

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