

The role of reflective techniques in professional development of teachers in a fiction-based course

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Our study presents the partial results of a survey of teachers and pre-service teachers between 2023 and 2024. The research framework was an online course combining reflective and narrative techniques based on reading works of fiction, using methodological elements of professional book clubs. In the present research we focus on the role of reflective techniques and practices in the professional development of the teacher participants in this complex process. This topic is presented through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 50 teachers' responses to a questionnaire survey. The analysis of the data shows that reflective techniques were appropriate tools to support teachers' professional development and learning: in varying proportions, but they played a role in exploring their individual pedagogical beliefs, identifying feelings related to their career and work, and in the construction or development of their professional identity.

teachers' professional development, professional book club, reflective techniques

1. Introduction

The research detailed in our study seeks to answer the question of how reflective techniques embedded in a complex methodology contributed to the professional development and learning of participants in a teacher training course following the structure of professional book clubs.

Talking about our reading experiences is a natural part of our everyday conversations (Oatley, 2011), but many people also seek opportunities to exchange ideas through guided, facilitated conversation (Gilbert, 2016). In Hungary, the history of communities formed to share reading experiences can be traced from the 18th century onwards (Maróti, 2013). Today we are living in an era when book clubs – or other similar small communities – are becoming increasingly popular. This interest multiplies the possibilities for libraries in terms of their mission in the field of reading promotion or literacy development, or even lifelong learning (Béres, 2017. p. 15). The same also leads to an increasing number of book clubs in different areas of everyday life, but also in different branches of science, and these clubs are increasingly becoming the subject of scientific research (Álvarez, Pascual-Díez, 2024).

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The theoretical background for our research is provided by a narrower field of the broad world of reading communities: we focus on professional book clubs that can support the professional development and learning of in-service teachers. But before we describe their characteristics, in exploring the theoretical background, two themes are briefly touched upon. The first is our model of teachers' continuous professional development and learning, the second is the role of reflective thinking in professional development and learning.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The professional development and learning model in our research

In our research, we considered the continuous professional development and learning of teachers as a complex process with specific patterns (Rapos, Lénárd, 2024) that can be interpreted throughout the whole career, which not only takes place at the cognitive level, but also includes internal contents such as beliefs (Pajares, 1992) and emotions (Bandura, 1993), and which is closely related to the development and formation of professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). Our starting point was that these elements interact with each other in the course of teaching (Kelchtermans, 2005), and also interact dynamically with plans, expectations and possible outcomes of professional development and learning, both in preparation for and later in a teacher's career (Van Huizen et al., 2005, Gracia et al., 2022).

2.2. Reflective thinking

To define reflective thinking, we use the definition by Taggart and Wilson (2005). "Reflective thinking is the process of making informed and logical decisions on pedagogical matters, then assessing the consequences of these decisions." Reflective thinking can play an important role in the exploration of pedagogical beliefs (Korthagen, 2005), it can include or be linked to affective elements (Arefian, 2022), and it can also play a role in the development of professional identity (Graham, Phelps, 2023).

By reflective techniques, we refer to practices and methods that can support or enhance the reflective thinking and reflexivity, for our course we selected from the collection by Judit Szivák (2014).

We also emphasize the importance of collective forms of reflexivity (Collin, Karsenti, 2011).

2.3. Teacher's professional book clubs

Professional book clubs largely follow a similar script: individual reading and writing exercises before the session, small group sharing and whole group discussions. Kooy (2006) considers social construction, narrativity and dialogicity as the pillars of the method, and communal story-sharing as its strength.

Perhaps the most obvious way to support teacher's professional development in book clubs is to read academic literature, but there are also examples of fiction as a starting point (Janzen, 2016; Harlin et al., 2014).

There is still little academic research on learning outcomes in book clubs with teachers, but even an overview of these would go beyond the scope of this paper. We refer only to some of the results that suggest that participation in book clubs can support teachers' professional development and learning in the areas highlighted earlier.

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The sharing of professional experiences provides an opportunity to explore and identify beliefs (Flood et al., 1994; Harlin et al., 2014), sometimes they can change as a result of the texts read and the discourse with peers (Mayer White, 2016). The recognition of emotions (Janzen, 2016), their increasingly bold expression (Harlin et al., 2014) or a change in pedagogical practice after identifying emotions (Mayer White, 2016) can also result of book club activities. Finally, participation in these communities can contribute to the formation and development of professional identity (Janzen, 2016). In some of the book clubs with teachers, reflection and self-reflection were emphasised (Brock, Pennington, 2014; Janzen, 2016; Mayer White, 2016). The reflective technique most often used was debate, but reflective journals also appeared (Flood et al., 1994).

Several studies have shown that book clubs in an online format have also supported the professional development and learning of teachers (Brock, Pennington, 2014; Reilly, 2008).

3. The research

Our overall research is descriptive and comparative. We follow a convergent design based on mixed methods (Creswell, Plano Clark, 2007). The placebo effect can be minimised by the methodological triangulation used (data examined by several quantitative and qualitative methods point to the same phenomenon) and the presentation of results that also addresses problems and contradictions. Our work aims to gain a deeper understanding of the participation of a small sample in a given situation, and not to generalise the results presented. However, we are confident that our results will contribute both to the promotion of professional book clubs and to the body of knowledge accumulated in the field of teacher's professional development and learning.

3.1. Research questions

Our broader research focuses on the question of how participation in a reflective-collaborative programme based on works of fiction contributes to the professional development of student teachers and in-service teachers. In this paper, we seek answer one more general and three specific research questions:

1. What was the role of reflective techniques and practices in the professional development of the participants of the courses with teachers?
2. What role did reflective techniques play in helping participants to explore and identify their pedagogical beliefs?
3. What was the role of reflective techniques in helping participants to identify their feelings and emotions related to their work as teachers?
4. What role did the reflective techniques play in developing and strengthening the participants' ideas about their role as teachers and their professional identity?

3.2. The context of the research: the Echo programme

The structure of the course, entitled *Echo – a narrative-reflective programme based on the reading of works of fiction with pedagogical relevance*, which is the context of our research, is partly based on the theoretical and methodological foundations presented in the previous chapter. The participants met ten times in an online space, and short stories or novel extracts provided the basis for the discussions. The theme of this was related to everyday life and to some competences of teach-

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ers (e.g. the role of the teacher, punishment and reward, discipline, performance, judgements of teacher effectiveness). We used narrative, reflective techniques or creative writing, small group and whole group discussions. Teachers also wrote a reflective journal during the training.

3.3. The sample

The sample of the survey was access-based, the respondents were Hungarian teachers who volunteered to attend the accredited training.

The study involved 50 teachers in six courses. The first groups started in April 2023 and the last group finished at the end of November 2023.

Two demographic characteristics of the participants (gender, age) are presented in Table 1 (n=50).

Table 1: Distribution of participants by gender and age

Women	Men	20-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	Over 60
48 people (96%)	2 people (4%)	1 person (2%)	4 people (8%)	13 people (26%)	28 people (56%)	4 people (8%)

The sample consisted of two kindergarten teachers, one day care teacher, one development teacher, one special needs teacher, two primary school teachers – the others were secondary school teachers. The majority of the latter (39, 78%) taught Hungarian language and literature as one or only of their specialisations.

We can also characterise teacher participants by the length of time in the profession: the lowest numbers of teacher with 0–10 years in the profession (6 in total), 17 with 21–30, and roughly similar numbers (14, 13) of teachers with 11–20 and 31–40 years in the profession.

As our overall research is descriptive and comparative in nature, we did not organise a control group, so comparisons are made between subgroups of teacher participants and teacher students, but in this study we report only the results of teacher participants.

3.4. Measuring instruments and methodology

In this paper, we analyse some of the responses to questionnaires. Participants completed an input questionnaire before entering the programme, after the programme, an exit questionnaire was used. A follow-up questionnaire was also carried out six months after the programme. Every effort was made to ensure that all participants filled in the latter, but only 37 teachers responded. Although we cannot draw any generalisable conclusions from these, we believe that they provide valuable data to complement our findings on the course. The implementation of the data collection is presented in Table 2.

For some of the questions, participants could only give numerical answers, while in other cases they could express their opinion on Likert scales or their yes–no answers in text. The text responses were processed using inductive content analysis, the quantifiable responses were subjected to statistical analyses. The small sample size would make it problematic to present statistically significant relationships, so we retained descriptive statistical procedures. Data were checked by intra-coding (Sántha, 2012).

"We used narrative, reflective techniques or creative writing, small group and whole group discussions."

Table 2: Data collection and number of respondents for the six courses

Dates of courses	Number of participants	Input questionnaire	Outcome questionnaire	Follow-up (six months after closure)
		Number of respondents	Number of respondents	Number of respondents
2024. 04. 03. - 06. 06.	11	11	11	7
2024. 04. 13. - 06. 15.	8	8	8	6
2024. 04. 18. - 06. 27.	7	7	7	6
2024. 06. 26. - 08. 28.	6	6	6	6
2024. 09. 18. - 11. 27.	10	10	9	7
2024. 09. 20. - 11. 29.	8	8	7	5
Total	50	50	48	37

4. Results

The presentation of the results is grouped around the themes of our research questions.

4.1. The role of reflective techniques in teachers' professional development and learning throughout the programme

4.1.1. Outcome questionnaire

In the outcome questionnaire teachers were asked to indicate on a Likert scale (1–5) how much they agreed that participation in the course had supported their professional development. The question received 43 responses, 10 (23.25%) with a score of 4, 33 (76.74%) with a score of 5 and no lower (mean: 4.76).

The next question was designed to explore how participants saw the role of different elements of the methodology, among which they had to allocate 100 points according to the role they attributed to each. Three teachers misunderstood the instructions, their responses are not included in the analysis. The results are presented in a bar chart (Fig. 1).

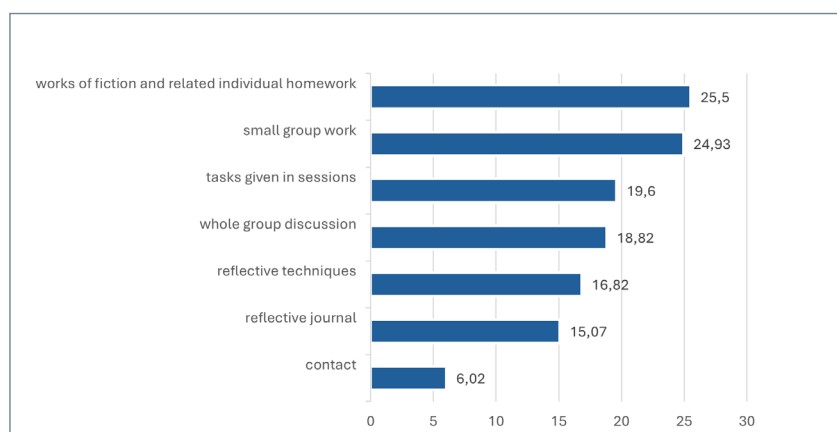


Fig. 1: Teachers' perception of the impact of methodological elements in supporting their professional development (n=42)

The two highest scores, very close to each other, were given to the combination of fiction and related individual homework assignments (average 25.5 points) and small group sharing (24.93 points). Participants attributed an average of 18.82 points to whole group sharing, and those who were in contact with each other outside the course attributed 6.02 points to this contact. During

the sessions, a wide variety of exercises and practices were carried out. Among these, a distinction was made between reflective techniques and other tasks and exercises. The impact of the latter was rated by the teachers with 19.6 points, and the learning and use of reflective techniques with 16.82 points. Analysis of other questionnaire responses showed that participants did not always make a clear distinction between the two types of tasks or exercises, which may have had an impact on the scores reported here. We included the reflective journal as a separate methodological element in the question. The impact of reflective journaling was rated by teachers with an average score of 15.07.

A yes–no question asked whether teachers thought the course would have an impact on their professional development in the future. Two did not answer, two answered no, and 44 answered yes (95.6%). 41 of them also provided an explanation of their decision. Content analysis of the responses shows that reflectivity is the one to which the greatest expected impact was attributed (27 coded units related to this), e.g. *"Reflectivity has been quite absent in my career, I hope it will be more conscious and systematic now"*. Of these, reflective thinking was highlighted most often (21), five mentioned reflective techniques in general, and one teacher mentioned reflective journaling. This was followed in expected impact by methodology (12 coded units), and in third place was fiction (6). Reflection (4) and community (3) were also referred.

4.1.2. Follow-up

The follow-up questionnaire also shows whether the participants still felt the impact of the course on their professional development and learning. Firstly, they marked this on a Likert scale (1–5), the average was 4.64, 25 marked a 5, 11 marked a 4, and the lowest was a 3, this occurred in one case (n=37). Next, teachers were asked to provide a textual explanation (n=33). The content analysis revealed that the impact of reflexivity and reflective thinking was the most commonly referred to (10 coded units), with 5 teachers highlighting a change of perspective as something in which they had developed (e.g. *"I can think with other people's minds, understand and accept other people's points of view: double monologue technique. I have a more refined sense of the other person's reality"*), 3 mentions of reflective techniques in general, and the Futures Wheel was specifically mentioned by one teacher. In terms of other impacts, 7 coded units referred to the impact on methodology, 5 referred to a strengthening of the professional identity of the participant, 4 referred to the impact of works of fiction, one of the community experience, and 2 mentioned a change in their teaching in general. One participant has included attending the course in her Master Teacher application, and one had passed on the methods to her colleagues.

4.2. The role of reflective techniques and exercises in exploring and identifying beliefs

As one item on the *Outcome Questionnaire*, teachers were asked to indicate their agreement on a Likert scale (1–5) with the following statement: *"The course provided an opportunity to explore and interpret my individual pedagogical beliefs"*. The mean of the responses was 4.86 (n=44). 31 teachers also provided textual justification. Content analysis revealed that thinking and discussion played the largest role in exploring beliefs according to the teachers: 12 and 12 coded units (23.53%) referred to this. Of the mentions of the discussions seven were for small group

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and five for whole group discussions (e.g. *"Through the discussion of each topic, it allowed me to examine how I relate to them: e.g. performance, teacher-student relationship, etc."*).

11 mentions (21.56%) related to reflectivity, 6 to reflective thinking and five to the use of reflective techniques: 3 to the reflective journals and 2 to the Repertory Grid. 10 coded units (19.6%) indicated that fiction also played a significant role in exploring and interpreting beliefs, and 6 (11.76%) linked other tasks to this. Those terms that did not clearly refer to a reflective technique were included in the general 'task' category in this and subsequent analyses.

Our findings on the role of sharing experiences in exploring beliefs are in line with the literature on book clubs (Brock, Pennington, 2014; Mayer White, 2016), and those showing the role of reflectivity are consistent with results in the broader field of teacher professional development (Szivák, 2014; Korthagen, 2005).

4.3. The role of reflective techniques and practices in identifying emotions related to the teaching profession and work

As for the identification of emotions, this statement was included in the *Outcome Questionnaire*: *"The course gave me the opportunity to identify my feelings and emotions related to my career and work as a teacher"*. The mean score of agreement with this statement was 4.86 on a five-point Likert scale (n=44). Based on the textual reasons of 32 participants, it was found that works of fiction played the greatest role in this area for teachers, with 13 coded units identified for this in the content analysis – the international literature also counts on this power of works of fiction (Janzen, 2016; Mayer White, 2016). This was followed by reflection (10 coded units), discussions (7) and other tasks (6). The role of reflective thinking was mentioned by only one teacher, two of the reflective techniques mentioned were reflective journals and one mentioned concept maps: *"The creation of a concept map and the selection of readings to be interpreted were very helpful in identifying my feelings about my teaching career."*

4.4. The role of reflective techniques and practices in strengthening professional identity

Respondents (n=44) indicated their agreement with the statement *"The course gave me the opportunity to develop and strengthen my ideas about my role as a teacher and my professional identity"* with a mean of 4.75 on a five-point Likert scale. A content analysis of the 27 textual justifications showed that the mention of conversations was the most frequent in this theme with 13 coded units (*"The experiences of my group mates and colleagues, our joint discussions, have greatly contributed to the fact that I can clarify and confirm my ideas about my identity while sharing them."*). 10 coded units referred to reflection and 8 to reflective thinking. The role of the fiction was mentioned by 7 coded units and other tasks and techniques by 2. Among reflective techniques, this questionnaire justification included a reference to the debate.

To summarise and illustrate the previous three themes, a diagram was created (Fig. 2).

The chart shows, that the different methodological elements of the course had the most developmental role in different areas: thinking was most important in exploring beliefs, discussion and reflection were most important in building professional identity, and works of fiction were most important in explor-

ing emotions. Reflective techniques (and other tasks) were less important than those mentioned earlier, according to teachers, except in the area of exploring and identifying emotions, where they were ahead of reflective thinking.

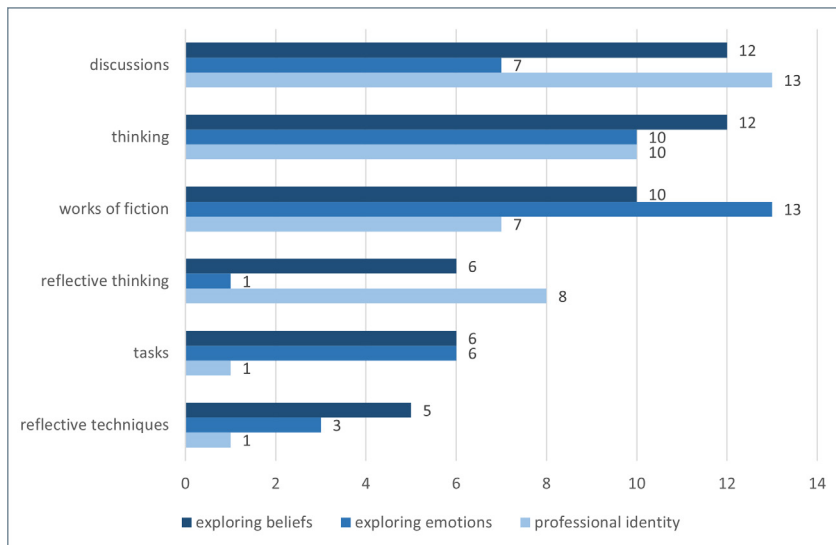


Fig. 2: The role of the main methodological elements of the Echo course in exploring beliefs, identifying feelings related to career and work, and in creating and strengthening professional identity according to teachers – the number of content items for each aspect in the participants' written responses

"Reflective thinking and the use or intention to use certain reflective techniques in the future were not only reinforced during the course, but also left their mark on the teachers' daily practice."

5. Discussion

In our research, we sought to answer the question of the role of reflective techniques and practices in the professional development and learning of teachers in a reflective-narrative course based on reading short stories or novel extracts evoking teacher figures and pedagogical situations. In line with our model of teachers' continuous professional development and learning, in addition to a more general examination of the issue, we focused in particular on how reflective techniques served to explore individual pedagogical beliefs, identify emotions related to the pedagogical career and pedagogical situations, and shape professional identity.

5.1. Answering our research questions

5.1.1. What role did reflective techniques and practices play in the professional development of the participants of the courses with teachers?

The questionnaires showed that the course supported the professional development and learning of the teachers who took part. Reflective practice, including the use of reflective techniques, was identified as a significant factor. Reflective thinking and the use or intention to use certain reflective techniques in the future were not only reinforced during the course, but also left their mark on the teachers' daily practice. Six months after the course, some of the participants reported that they were more aware of their pedagogical decisions, that they were able to put themselves in other people's shoes more easily, and that they solved daily pedagogical problems more easily or in a different way.

5.1.2. What role did reflective techniques play in helping participants to explore and identify their pedagogical beliefs?

The complementary impact of reflective thinking and reflective techniques has been significant in the area of exploring beliefs. The course was an appropriate medium, according to the teachers, to analyse and become aware of their pedagogical activities, free from the daily routine and time constraints.

5.1.3. What was the role of reflective techniques in helping participants to identify their feelings and emotions related to their work as teachers?

The complex structure of the Echo course helped teachers to identify their emotions related to their work, but less emphasis was placed on reflective thinking or reflective techniques. Among reflective techniques, the usefulness of the reflective journal and the concept map were highlighted.

5.1.4. What role did the reflective techniques play in developing and strengthening the participants' ideas about their role as teachers and their professional identity?

Teachers recognised the importance of reflective thinking for building their professional identity, and one participant highlighted the role of debate in this. Many of them also mentioned that their professional self-awareness and self-image had developed and how the process started here could be the starting point for their future development.

5.2. The importance of methodological diversity

In the final analysis we focused on the role of the reflective techniques. But the results showed that methodological complexity was important to make our course effective in all three priority areas. It was useful to design the programme on the basis of the lessons learned from the documented book clubs: to build on the power of the literary texts themselves to engage and mobilise emotions (Janzen, 2016), its self-references, its links to experiences in practice (Harlin et al., 2014), on individual reflection, task solving, small group and whole group discussions (Mayer White, 2016), and to enrich all of this with reflective techniques.

6. Summary

The results of our research confirm that the narrative-reflective course we designed supported the professional development and learning of the teachers in the areas of exploring beliefs and emotions and developing their professional identity. Elements that reinforced reflectivity played a significant role in this.

As a continuation of our research, we will refine and clarify the results on reflective techniques by analysing other data sources (reflective journals) and we compare data collected from the teachers and student teachers who participated in the courses.

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