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Print ISSN 0034-8678; Online ISSN: 2559 - 639X

FROM DESCRIPTION TO CRITICAL REFLECTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' JOURNALING

De la descriere la reflecție critică: un studiu fenomenologic al jurnalelor
profesorilor în formare

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Journal of Pedagogy, 2025 (2), 99 - 118

<https://doi.org/10.26755/RevPed/2025.2/99>

The online version of this article can be found at: <https://revped.ise.ro/category/2025/>



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FROM DESCRIPTION TO CRITICAL REFLECTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' JOURNALING

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Abstract

The act of reflection has become the subject of increasing scholarly attention, with researchers exploring its various aspects and implications. For this reason, the present study looks into the pre-service teachers' perspectives on reflective journaling during their final-year, one-semester practicum within a teacher education program, focusing on how the prospective teachers perceive the purpose of reflective journaling and the level of reflection they demonstrate in their journal entries. The study makes use of a phenomenological approach and draws on two data sources – reflective journals and focus groups with 16 pre-service teachers.

Findings show that most participants initially viewed journaling as a helpful tool for understanding teaching practices, making decisions, and linking theory to practice. They reported that it enhanced self-awareness, highlighted areas for improvement, and supported their developing teacher identity. However, some challenges emerged.

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Some pre-service teachers lacked confidence in their reflective abilities and expressed a need for clearer guidance and mentorship. Others found journaling repetitive, time-consuming, or burdensome, especially amid final-year academic demands. Analysis using the 5R framework revealed that most entries remained at the *Responding* and *Relating* levels, indicating predominantly descriptive reflections with limited analytical depth. Only a small proportion demonstrated higher-order reasoning or reconstruction.

These findings suggest that reflective journaling alone may be insufficient to cultivate deep reflective skills without explicit instruction, modelling, and structured support. Strengthening reflective practice within teacher preparation requires clearer frameworks, scaffolding activities, and constructive feedback to help future educators critically examine their assumptions and enhance their professional growth.

Keywords: phenomenological approach, pre-service teachers, reflective journaling, reflective practice, teacher education.

Rezumat

Actul reflecției a devenit subiectul unei atenții academice tot mai mari, cercetătorii explorând diferitele sale dimensiuni și implicații. Din acest motiv, prezentul studiu a investigat perspectivele cadrelor didactice în formare privind utilizarea jurnalului reflexiv în timpul stagiului final de practică pedagogică, desfășurat pe durata unui semestru, în cadrul unui program de formare a profesorilor. Studiul s-a concentrat asupra modului în care aceștia înțeleg scopul jurnalului reflexiv și asupra nivelului de reflecție manifestat în intrările în jurnal. Utilizând o abordare fenomenologică, cercetarea s-a bazat pe două surse de date: jurnalele reflexive și trei focus grupuri cu 16 cadre didactice în formare.

Rezultatele arată că majoritatea participanților au perceput inițial jurnalul drept un instrument util pentru înțelegerea practicilor de predare, luarea deciziilor și realizarea conexiunilor dintre teorie și practică. Ei au raportat că acesta le-a consolidat auto-reflecția, a evidențiat domeniile care necesită îmbunătățire și a sprijinit dezvoltarea identității lor profesionale. Cu toate acestea, au fost identificate și unele provocări. Unele cadre didactice în formare au manifestat o lipsă de încredere în abilitățile lor reflexive și au subliniat nevoia unor orientări și unui mentorat mai clare. Alții au considerat activitatea de jurnalizare repetitivă, consumatoare de timp sau împovărătoare, mai ales în contextul solicitărilor academice din ultimul an de studiu. Analiza realizată prin intermediul cadrului 5R a arătat că majoritatea însemnărilor s-au situat la nivelurile Responding și Relating, indicând reflecții predominant descriptive, cu profunzime analitică limitată. Doar un număr redus a demonstrat raționamente de nivel superior sau reconstrucție.

Aceste constatări sugerează că jurnalizarea reflexivă, de una singură, poate fi insuficientă pentru a cultiva competențe reflexive profunde, în lipsa unei instruiți explicite, a modelării și a unui sprijin structurat. Consolidarea practicii reflexive în formarea inițială a profesorilor necesită cadre conceptuale mai clare, activități ghidate și feedback constructiv care să îi ajute pe viitorii profesori să își examineze critic presupunerile și să crească profesional.

Cuvinte-cheie: *abordare fenomenologică, cadre didactice în formare, formarea profesorilor, jurnal reflexiv, practică reflexivă.*

1. Introduction

For the past few years, there have been considerable interest and discussion about the role of reflection in education on a global scale. To an ever greater extent, pedagogues from various disciplines are adopting a reflective approach and encouraging students to delve into self-discovery by participating in reflective activities in order to better understand their experiences (Guo, 2021; Ravanal Moreno et al., 2021).

The act of reflection has become an increasingly explored topic. Even though the literature offers no consensus on the definition of reflection, most approaches would include deliberate contemplation regarding beliefs, thoughts, or actions with the objective of improvement or learning (Loughran, 2006). As posited by Harvey et al. (2016), this process is intentionally and conscientiously carried out as it employs a person's cognitive, emotional and somatic capacities. It entails a meticulous reflection on past, present, or future actions, with the aim of facilitating learning and improving actions.

It is imperative to recognize the indispensable role that reflection plays within the broader spectrum of educator training (Loughran, 2002). Consequently, focus should be placed on the array of methods through which the reflective practice can be implemented. The methods used in reflection techniques vary, as do the skills required to use them. A plethora of techniques for reflection are at one's disposal, depending on the circumstances: essays and reports, creative/ expressive media (such as storytelling, music/song, drama, video, photography, poetry, dance/ movement), organizing tools (for instance, flow charts, mind maps), analytical approaches (for instance, critical-incident

analysis), as well as journals (structured or unstructured) (Harvey, 2020). Among these choices, the reflective journal stands out as a highly adaptable and frequently used technique, providing a methodical but individual way to record reflections and events that have taken place over time.

A reflective journal, also referred to as a reflective narrative, is “a collection of thoughts, feelings, observations, notes, and other related resources created over a period of time”, according to Ghanizadeh et al. (2020). It is often a component of an academic curriculum, fieldwork, or a professional placement. According to Wong et al. (1995), journal writing is a process of reflection. This process begins when the learner documents their experience. Then, the learner returns to the experience, remembers what happened, and relives the experience. Finally, the learner re-evaluates the experience. Thus, the whole point of a reflective journal is to make learning more meaningful by getting people to write about and think about their own experiences. The learner’s progress is recorded in this document, which is continually growing.

Reflective journaling is a widely used strategy in teacher education programs around the world. It helps future and current teachers understand themselves better, think critically, and grow as professionals. Consequently, various reflective journal frameworks have been systematically integrated into teacher education curricula to support the development of reflective practice (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Sileo et al., 1998).

Across higher education, reflection is a widely practiced experiential learning activity that is integral to supporting students (Veine et al., 2019). The efficacy of reflective journals in teacher education programs has been demonstrated by numerous studies. Reflective journals have been shown to facilitate self-efficacy, self-dialogue and self-assessment among pre-service teachers, enabling them to systematically record their thoughts and beliefs (Conkling, 2003; Doyran, 2013; Uline et al., 2004). Moreover, in a recent study (Malicay, 2023), journaling has been proven to have a positive impact on respondents’ pedagogical competencies. Pre-service teachers have reported that the main advantages of journaling during practicum periods are improved self-assurance, motivation, and refined writing skills.

Research with early childhood professionals and language teachers has revealed that journals provide a distinctive setting for aspiring educators to

deal with difficulties experienced in the field, address subjects such as student management, investigate modern tech integration, and assess the effectiveness of their teaching methods in real-world classroom settings (Barber, 2020). Moreover, reflective journaling plays a key role in fostering the growth of problem-solving abilities, conscious self-evaluation, and emotional intelligence (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019). The process helps professionals rigorously assess the relationship between theory and practice, rethink their learning and teaching methods, and improve their ability to deal with pressure over time (Göker, 2016).

Notwithstanding the substantial body of compelling evidence highlighting its efficacy, the successful implementation of reflective journaling in teacher education continues to face persistent challenges. Several studies have reported negative reactions to the use of journals. A particular concern that has been expressed by pre-service teachers is a lack of understanding and insufficient time to complete assignments (Black et al., 2000; Lindroth, 2014; Stiler & Philleo, 2003). Moreover, the success of journaling activities is determined by institutional support, which is sometimes lacking. This refers to mentorship or guidance to facilitate the reflection process, as well as the recognition of the educational value of journaling (Edmond & Felix, 2024). The quality of reflective practice represents an additional challenge that must be addressed because some professionals engage in what is referred to as “surface-level”, which limits their ability to engage in critical reflection and potential transformative practices (Šarić & Šteh, 2017).

To address these concerns, educational instructors should try to provide clearer guidelines, offer examples of reflective writing, and use structured prompts to support the reflective process. This has been shown to improve engagement and the quality of journal entries (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019). Moreover, according to Power (2012), the provision of scaffolding through guidelines and assessment frameworks is said to contribute to reflection quality.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the purpose of this investigation was to gain an understanding of the viewpoint of pre-service educators regarding reflective journaling during their final year in a one-semester practicum within a teacher education program. This inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

- In what ways do pre-service teachers perceive the purpose of reflective journaling?
- What is the level of the students' reflections in journal entries?

2. Methodology

The study adheres to the guiding principles of the phenomenological approach, with the aim of attaining a better understanding of individual circumstances with a specific emphasis on investigating the experiences of learners, following Creswell's (2013) framework.

To better understand the phenomenon being studied, the investigation focused on two main data sources: focus groups and reflective journals. The focus group discussions allowed participants to share their perspectives, exchange ideas, and work together to create meaning. The reflective journals allowed each participant to write about their personal experiences with the reflective teaching process. The combination of these two methods was especially helpful in understanding the experiences of third-year pre-primary education students as it allowed for both group and individual reflection.

This methodological approach was based on Mouton and Marais' (1994) design for qualitative, contextual, exploratory, and descriptive research. This choice of design was viewed as suitable for exploring intricate, context-dependent human experiences that are not easily measured but are best understood through interpretation and understanding.

2.1. Research participants and sampling strategy

For the purposes of this study, a convenience sampling method was employed for selecting the participants. This approach was guided by the recommendations of Teddlie and Yu (2007). A selection criterion was established based on their previous engagement in courses and seminars from the previous semester, with a minimum attendance requirement of 75%.

In the first stage of participant recruitment, 38 final-year students enrolled in

a primary and early childhood education program at the University of Bucharest were contacted and informed about the purpose, procedures, and ethical framework of the study. Sixteen students consented to participate and were included in the research sample. All participants in the study were female, aged between 24 and 43, and consistent with the typical gender distribution in the primary and early childhood education cohorts.

Before the study began, written informed consent was obtained from all 16 participants. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Then, as part of their final-year practicum, they undertook a four-month placement at an early childhood educational institution. The one-semester component of the program aimed to prepare students for the teaching profession while fostering a professional relationship with their mentor teachers through classroom modelling, and instructional feedback.

In this context, pre-service teachers were seniors in the university's education program who completed a year-long internship in a mentor teacher's kindergarten classroom. The study focused on final-year teacher candidates because they are in a pivotal stage of their professional development and this phase marks a crucial transition between their preparation and entry into the teaching profession. They are combining their existing knowledge and practical abilities to get ready for independent teaching roles. Therefore, at this stage, reflection becomes even more important because it supports their readiness to enter the profession. Reflection helps them connect the theoretical foundations from their coursework with the practical experiences they gained during their practicum placement, as this allows them to balance idealized pedagogical models with the real challenges of the classroom.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected during the pedagogical practicum in a kindergarten classroom. At the start of their teaching practice, students already had some understanding of reflective practices. They were encouraged to interpret the practice from a theoretical standpoint, as well as document their experiences, thoughts, and learning processes in a reflective journal throughout the placement on a weekly or more frequent basis.

The collected data was thoroughly examined and systematically categorized from a total of 236 entries. The length of journal entries varied, with some ranging from approximately 30 words to over 800 words. The majority of entries fell within the range of 300 to 400 words on average. To analyze these reflections in a structured manner, the 5R framework (Bain et al., 2002) was adopted for the present study.

Moreover, the study involved the organization of three focus groups after the collection of the reflective journals: the first group included six students, while the second and third groups each comprised five students. The composition of the groups was determined by the kindergarten placement of the study participants. The focus groups ranged in duration from 80 to 110 minutes. The students consented to having their sessions recorded with the objective of enhancing the subsequent analysis of their responses. Focus groups were selected with the aim of fostering an opportunity for students to offer their insights and viewpoints on their experience with journal writing during the practicum period.

3. Findings

3.1. Students' beliefs of the value of journaling

The focus groups indicate that most participants (15 of 16) reacted positively and provided meaningful comments in support of the reflective journal writing activity. They reported that journaling facilitated a more profound comprehension of the teaching and learning processes, as well as the capacity to identify obstacles and errors in practice. The participants shared their reflections concerning the kindergarten environment, their teaching methods, and the overall learning experience. They highlighted that reflective journaling was particularly valuable for:

- evaluating and improving teaching practices (assessing activities and lesson plans, and identifying effective aspects of teaching);
- decision-making (identifying challenges, proposing solutions, and making adjustments);
- self-reflection (improving themselves as teaching professionals, reflecting on the link between theoretical knowledge and practical application in

the classroom setting, as well as recognizing the traits and skills that contribute to effective and innovative teaching).

During the focus group sessions, they provided examples that illustrated the ways in which reflective journaling helped them critically assess their lessons, identify effective aspects of their teaching, and recognize areas needing improvement. As one student explained,

Writing in the journal helped me notice what was working in my lessons and what wasn't. It made me think about how to improve and be better. [...] I always thought about how I would like to be as a teacher, [...] I think the journal helped me to identify my weak areas... I know that I have to learn more about classroom management and to be more creative. (Participant no. 8)

Reflective journaling also facilitated decision-making and continuous learning, enabling students to address challenges and make informed adjustments in their practice. One participant noted:

I also learned that it's important to take a moment to think about what just happened. I liked reflecting right after lessons because I felt like I had the clearest thoughts and feelings about the lesson then. [...] It was a good strategy for me to think about the obstacles and how to overcome them in my teaching. (Participant no. 14)

Several participants emphasized the role of journaling in promoting professional growth and deeper reflection on their teaching identity. One student shared:

I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, but I'd never really thought about what kind of teacher I wanted to be. This activity of writing in a journal made me think a lot about what it really means to be a teacher. [...] I think I gained a lot of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, about what teaching actually means in these past few months. [...] I think that many of my colleagues can agree that it was really helpful for us to be part of this. (Participant no. 9)

Finally, many students linked journaling directly to improving their

understanding of pupils' needs and enhancing lesson planning. As one reflected:

...it helped me reflect on the challenges and how to improve, and it's really about continuous learning. [...] By thinking deeply about these things, I can understand the children's needs better, and this can help me design the activities more effectively. [...] I really think that journaling helped me become a better version of myself and a better educator. (Participant no. 12)

Overall, the focus group discussions revealed that reflective journaling was perceived as a valuable pedagogical tool. The participants' reflections suggest that journaling was beneficial for their teacher training experience and a possible catalyst for meaningful professional learning. Nevertheless, even if the participants emphasised the beneficial impact of the activity, the pre-service teachers identified challenges associated with it. These challenges are discussed in the following section.

3.2. Students' challenges with reflective journaling

The presence of low self-confidence in one's abilities has been identified as a factor that can compromise the quality of reflective journaling. According to the study participants, they perceived a need for structured training in critical reflection and effective self-evaluation strategies. This necessity arose from the fact that pre-service teachers frequently experience uncertainty regarding their ability to assess their own teaching practices in a constructive manner. When reflective journaling is not accompanied by proper mentorship, it may deviate from the purpose it was originally intended for. Several participants expressed similar concerns, as reflected in the following excerpts:

Sometimes I don't know if I'm reflecting correctly so I just write what I remember. (Participant no. 2)

I often felt that I'm just summarizing what happened. I felt the need to have some sort of guidance or instruction from the mentor or our teachers at the university. [...] At least, that was what I felt as a need for being better at reflecting during my practicum. (Participant no. 10)

We have never learned how to properly reflect. I think we can learn this, and it shouldn't be so hard. [...] When I accepted to be a participant in this

study, I thought it would be a piece of cake for me to write in a reflective journal... Now, I do not feel the same way about writing a journal. [...] It is quite hard if you think about it. (Participant no. 11)

Moreover, journaling can, over time, become repetitive and uninspiring, particularly when the reflection tasks lack variety. Two of them have encountered difficulties in sustaining their motivation for regular journaling, perceiving the activity as bothersome rather than beneficial. They argued that the time-consuming nature of the final year coursework and practicum commitments impeded their ability to engage in thorough and regular reflection.

After the first month, I began disliking writing in the journal... perhaps “disliking” is not the right word, but it felt like a burden. We have many responsibilities as third-year students and I had to make time for writing in the journal [...] and the feeling was that that time could have been better spent. I understand that writing in the journal has many advantages, but I think it might have been more beneficial to do it during the first year. (Participant no. 3)

It was really hard for me to write in the journal. It was a little boring to write by the end of the practicum. Sometimes I would write the same things [...]. Yes, I think it was like a chore. I do not know how much it helped me in the end. (Participant no. 7)

3.3. Level of students’ written reflections

For the purpose of this study, the 5R framework (Bain et al., 2002) has been utilized as this framework serves as a valuable tool for understanding the nature of reflection in preservice teacher education. The framework encompasses five levels of the act of reflection: (1) Reporting, (2) Responding, (3) Relating, (4) Reasoning, and (5) Reconstructing.

According to the proposed framework, reflection is not conceived of as a simple, unchanging entity, but rather as a developmental progression. In this conceptualization, each level represents a more refined engagement with teaching experiences and professional knowledge. At the fundamental level, *Reporting* entails pre-service teachers’ description of teaching events without the implementation of in-depth analysis. On the other hand, *Reconstructing*

signifies the most advanced level, at which pre-service teachers undergo a fundamental reconceptualization of their pedagogical understanding and practice.

To clarify how each stage is characterized in practice, Table no. 1 summarises the five levels of the 5R framework and includes examples drawn from the reflective journals.

Table no. 1. Five Levels of the 5R Framework with Definitions and Examples

Level of reflection	Operational Definition	Excerpts from journals
Reporting	The student offers a description, report, or retelling of events, without observations or insights.	<p>"During the morning session, I supervised the children while they completed a puzzle activity. Some worked in pairs and others worked alone. After they finished, we moved on to our circle time routine." (Participant no. 3)</p> <p>"We had an art activity today, the children used coloured paper and glue to make simple geometrical shapes. I handed out the materials and watched them work." (Participant no. 15)</p>
Responding	<p>The student utilizes the source data in a limited way, with minimal transformation.</p> <p>The student makes an observation or judgment without making further inferences or explaining the reasons for the judgment.</p> <p>The student shares feelings such as happiness, relief, anxiety, etc.</p>	<p>"I think the lesson went well. I helped the children during a science activity about plants and they were all curious and asked lots of questions. Most of them completed the tasks in a short amount of time. I enjoyed seeing the children so invested in learning more about plants." (Participant no. 11)</p> <p>"Today was a nice day. Children had to draw their favorite animal. Matei drew a brown dog, Maria a pink rabbit, Natalia a cat, and Sara a pony. Most of the children drew cats and dogs, but there was a child that tried to draw a leopard, and asked me to help him. I was happy to help and I think children like me. They have gotten used to me." (Participant no. 15)</p>
Relating	<p>The student identifies parts of the data that are personally meaningful or relevant to their past or present experiences.</p> <p>The student's objective is to gain a basic understanding of relationships, identifying areas of strength, areas for growth, past failures, and lessons learned from practical experiences.</p>	<p>"Yesterday I helped the children during free play. Most of them were engaged, and I think the activities went okay. I also read a story about farm animals and asked some questions afterward in order to see if they understood the story. Some children were active, while others seemed distracted. [...] I think I need to find better ways to keep everyone's attention." (Participant no. 5)</p> <p>"The lesson was about numbers and I think it went okay. Maybe I should have given clearer examples, but overall, it was a good learning experience for the children." (Participant no. 1)</p>

Level of reflection	Operational Definition	Excerpts from journals
Reasoning	<p>The student combines the data with theoretical concepts or personal experience, and transforms it into a new understanding.</p> <p>The student is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons behind events and experiences.</p> <p>They strive to explain their own or others' behaviour or feelings, drawing on their personal insights, inferences, and prior knowledge, with a sense of depth.</p> <p>The relationship between theory and practice is studied in a meaningful way.</p>	<p>"Today, I saw that some children had trouble staying focused when the instructions were long. This showed that young children can't concentrate for long, which is in line with what I've found out about early childhood development at the courses. [...] In the future, I plan to break things down into smaller steps to help them stay focused." (Participant no. 12)</p> <p>"During the reading activity, a few children seemed confused by the story questions, which made me realize they need more concrete examples to understand abstract ideas. I plan to use visual aids next time to help them grasp the concepts more effectively." (Participant no. 14)</p>
Reconstructing	<p>The student displays a high level of abstract thinking.</p> <p>The student generalizes and applies their learning.</p> <p>The student draws an original conclusion from their reflections.</p> <p>The student generalizes from their experience.</p> <p>The student extracts general principles.</p> <p>The student formulates a personal theory of teaching.</p> <p>The student extracts and internalizes the personal significance of their learning.</p> <p>The student plans their own further learning based on their personal reflections.</p>	<p>"When I saw how much better the children learned when the lessons included movement and hands-on materials, it made me rethink how I plan activities. I want to develop my own strategy that mixes short movement tasks with practical activities, followed by a quick class discussion to help children make sense of what they've done. I plan to try this structure in several lessons and keep notes on how engaged the children are." (Participant no. 8)</p> <p>"[...] I noticed that the children became more curious and focused during simple science experiments, which made me think about why hands-on activities help them learn. [...] I want to try a teaching approach that starts with a question, lets them explore through experiments, and ends with a discussion. I'll observe how this affects their learning and use what I learn to improve my future lessons. I think this approach could also be adapted for other types of activities, not just science lessons. [...] I first read about this approach in a course book last year, which really helped me during the practicum." (Participant no. 9)</p>

As shown in Table no. 2, the majority of reflections occurred at the mid-range levels of the 5R framework. Specifically, 34% of segments fell within *Responding*, and 36% of segments fell within *Relating*. Higher-order reflections (*Reasoning* and *Reconstructing*) were less common, together representing only 26% of the entries, suggesting limited engagement with

deeper analytical processes. This data suggests that while pre-service teachers often demonstrated an ability to move beyond simple description, they may have faced challenges in progressing toward the more complex aspects of reflection. The findings are consistent with existing literature suggesting that pre-service teachers frequently experience difficulty in justifying their teaching decisions (Francis & Ingram-Starrs, 2005).

Table no. 2. Percentage of occurrence of each reflection level

Level of reflection	Segments (%)
Reporting	4%
Responding	34%
Relating	36%
Reasoning	22%
Reconstructing	4%

4. Discussion and conclusions

Reflective practice has seen a surge in popularity across various professional fields and educational settings in recent decades. Nevertheless, studies show that developing the capacity for introspection constitutes a significant challenge for pre-service teachers (Francis & Ingram-Starrs, 2005).

For this reason, the present study explored the pre-service teachers' perspectives on reflective journaling during their final-year, one-semester practicum within a teacher education program, focusing on how they perceive the purpose of reflective journaling and the level of reflection demonstrated in their journal entries.

Findings indicate that, at the beginning of their training, many prospective educators regarded journaling as a beneficial tool for articulating thoughts, consolidating learning, and monitoring progress. Students highlighted that reflective journaling was particularly valuable for evaluating and improving teaching practices, supporting decision-making, and fostering self-reflection. However, perceptions regarding the value of journaling underwent a gradual transformation over the course of the practicum period. For a few of the study participants, the initial enthusiasm diminished as journaling became a habitual practice, reducing its effectiveness as a reflective exercise. As a

result, the entries became more concise and descriptive, lacking in depth and substantive reflection. This practice frequently resulted in a perception among some teacher candidates that journaling was considered less effective for professional development. Specifically, there was an inclination to regard journaling as a formal requirement rather than an effective learning instrument. This indicates a discrepancy between the intended reflective purpose and actual practice context, a pattern similarly reported in other studies exploring reflective journaling in teacher education (e.g., Alsuhaibani, 2019; Agustin, 2019).

Some pre-service teachers have expressed that reflective journaling can become a repetitive part of their routine over time. This can unfortunately cause it to lose its initial usefulness and be viewed as just another required task rather than a meaningful professional development activity. It seems that time constraints might play a significant role as a barrier to engagement. Pre-service teachers may find the process quite time-consuming without receiving ongoing feedback on their journal entries. Moreover, the need to complete a variety of course and practical requirements during the final-year university studies may potentially limit available time and cognitive resources for extended, in-depth reflection during teaching practice. This could potentially lead to a reduction in motivation to engage deeply with the reflective process. This idea was echoed in the focus groups, where participants highlighted an insufficient understanding of reflective purposes, as well as a lack of guidance designed to facilitate engagement with the journaling activities.

The 5R framework was used in this study because it has been shown to be an effective tool for distinguishing between surface-level and deep reflection. The data has shown that most journal entries were deficient in analytical depth. Most participants approached journaling as a mere descriptive record of events or feelings. This approach, however, failed to capitalize on the potential for critical self-evaluation.

When pre-service teachers are not able to move beyond surface-level reflection, they may miss opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the inherent value of teaching. Also, this may have the effect of preventing novice educators from developing the critical self-awareness that could help them identify the strengths and weaknesses in their educational approaches.

Studies have suggested that this may subsequently become visible in their professional behaviour and even teaching effectiveness (Fitria et al., 2024; Rakhimova, 2024). It is possible that, without opportunities for self-reflection and self-assessment during the training phase, new teachers may find themselves relying more heavily on trial-and-error learning or on imitation of observed practices rather than engaging in reflective practice that is informed by theory. Al-Najjar et al. (2024) have examined the impact of previous student teaching experiences on in-service teachers' perspectives and their findings indicate that when pre-service programs do not successfully cultivate profound reflective capacities, teachers often express discontent.

The evidence suggests that reflective journals alone may not be sufficient to develop the complex cognitive and metacognitive skills necessary for deep critical reflection, at least without explicit instruction, modelling, and scaffolding. The development of reflective capacity may be best supported through an integration of various elements, such as: clearly defined conceptual frameworks that distinguish between different types and levels of reflection, guidance in reflective processes (such as reflective questions or self-assessment statements to fill in), timely and constructive feedback on reflective writing, and authentic contexts where reflection is perceived as a purposeful activity rather than a procedural obligation.

Many pre-service teachers still have problems because they have not been taught how to think critically or shown how to do it. They have also not been given clear examples of what it means to think deeply. During field experiences, pre-service teachers encounter a sudden change in their expectations, often grappling with challenges in applying the pedagogical practices they learned in their coursework. They also often find themselves with a sense of a lack of control in the classroom environment.

Therefore, it is not enough to simply provide opportunities for reflection. There is an urgent need to address the challenges faced by learners in connecting their learning and challenging existing knowledge through reflective practice. Therefore, reflective practice must become an integral component of the teachers' professional identity, inherently incorporated into their competence framework and their daily educational practices (Stăncescu et al., 2018). Ultimately, fostering sustained reflective habits can equip future

teachers with the tools they need to adapt to diverse classroom realities, engage critically with their own assumptions, and continually seek ways to grow professionally.

5. Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights into pre-service teachers' reflective journaling practices, it is important to acknowledge some limitations.

First, as the sample size was relatively small, and participants were selected from a single university program using a convenience sampling strategy, the findings cannot be generalizable to broader populations of pre-service teachers in different institutional or cultural contexts.

Second, the focus group setting proved to be a valuable source of rich qualitative data. Nevertheless, the presence of peers among the participants may have influenced their openness to sharing critical or negative views which could have limited the range of opinions that were shared.

Finally, it is important to note that the study relied on self-reported data, which is subject to possible biases (for example, selective memory, or the tendency to present oneself in a favourable light). Some entries may have been influenced by perceptions of what supervisors or researchers expected to read.

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