

Reflective Writing as a Means Towards Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to present how reflective writing contributed as a means for teachers' professional development in the context of an action research project where a group of teachers engaged themselves on approaching diversity issues in their settings. During the preparation phase, participants were systematically involved in a variety of educational activities and workshops in order to approach reflective writing. At the next phase of the research, they were, thus, asked to carefully observe their contexts and their own practice and keep written records both from important "flash-points" they identified in their classroom and from the anti-bias sessions they conducted. As part of the process, they were invited to reflect on and submit copies of their records. Their writings were then discussed and commented on during feedback group meetings, where all participants shared their views and experiences in order to enrich their understandings. The different research data collected were analysed using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. According to the results, reflective writing proved an effective and powerful means for teacher professional evolution, although a number of significant challenges teachers were faced with were recognised. In order to overcome difficulties, individual and team support proved valuable allies. The small community of learning and practice that was gradually created seemed to have led to participants reconsidering their pedagogical perceptions, in the light of their critical interaction. The results of the study could contribute to the discussion about the significance of using reflective writing for teachers' professional evolution.

Keywords: Action research, Critical feedback, Critical incidents, Critical thinking, Reflective writing, Teachers professional development

Introduction

In this article we will try to highlight the most important findings of a study concerning the significance of using written records as a means for teachers' professional development in the context of reflective models for education. The study was embedded in a doctoral research conducted from October 2018 to June 2019. Within that context, twelve educators from various backgrounds and educational settings were involved in a collaborative action research project, adopting different roles (action researchers, critical friends, researcher-facilitator)¹. More specifically, nine preschool teachers were engaged in a project where they attempted to adopt the Persona Dolls (P.D.) approach² as a method to manage diversity issues and prevent exclusion in their classrooms. Participants were invited to approach the method as action researchers and try to explore the possibilities and challenges they came across during their involvement in the programme that were relevant to the research hypothesis. They were expected to carefully observe their class and systematically keep written records of both critical events they identified and of the P.D. sessions they organized, all related to the research axes. They were then encouraged to critically reflect on them, also in writing.

Within the framework of the research, they were involved in feedback meetings with the whole group, designed to provide them with theoretical and methodological support. Towards this effort, three other preschool teachers – the researcher as the facilitator and her two critical friends – also took part as members of the research team.

As the project evolved, teachers' writings started becoming more reflective, thus, revealing changes in their educational perceptions and influencing the way they approached their role as professionals. It, therefore, gradually became evident that other issues, equally significant, related to teachers' professional development issues arose and made their exploration important. Among the most prominent ones was the impact of using written records as a means for teachers to reflect on their beliefs, their attitudes and, consequently, on their practice.

This paper is organised in five parts. The present introduction is the first one. In the second part there is a brief review of the relevant literature that outlines

1 The first author contributed to the research project as researcher and facilitator of the action research project.

2 The Persona Dolls approach was developed by preschool teachers in Britain and South Africa as a method to counter prejudice and discrimination in school in an effort to implement inclusion and social justice. Using life stories teachers attempt to familiarise children with different aspects of human diversity and though them help them develop empathy, unlearn prejudice and act against discrimination (Brown, 2001; Whitney, 1999). Persona Dolls (P.D.) are special, life-like dolls, with their own personalities used as educational tools by teachers.

the theoretical context of the study. The third part summarises the methodology we followed, i.e. the purpose and the aims, the research framework and the method. The most important findings are discussed in the fourth part. Finally, in the fifth part, we try to present our main conclusions about how reflective writing, as encouraged in the process of our research project, affected teachers' professional development.

(Re)considering teacher professional development:

Teachers as reflective professionals

Research literature emphasises the need for continuous professional development for teachers. Yet, much of the relevant research concludes that the simple presentation of new theories and techniques does not automatically imply their acceptance and implementation by teachers in their classroom (Avgitidou, 2014; Elliot, 1989; Fullan, 2007; Speck & Knipe, 2005; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Much of the criticism on traditional teacher training is based on the concept that they follow a top-to-bottom model of professional learning, the content of which is pre-planned, predetermined and linearly given by theorists or academicians to all participant teachers (Elliot, 1989). Most frequently, training focuses either on obtaining/improving instructional skills or on familiarising participants with new programmes as forms of adapting existing curricula (Fullan, 2007; Zeichner and Liston, 2014). However, such approaches seem to reveal a prevailing underestimation of teachers' contribution to the enrichment of our knowledge about the educational process (Day & Gu, 2010; Zeichner and Liston, (2014). In fact, it appears that relevant training models, although popular, have rather failed to sustain teachers' professional development and provide appropriate respond to important challenges and dilemmas they meet, at least in the long term (Speck & Knipe, 2005).

On the other hand, reflective approaches acknowledge the value of using professional knowledge to adapt educational practices according to the needs, the special characteristics and culture of each educational context (Altrichter, 2005; Avgitidou, 2014; Fullan, 2007). Zeichner and Liston (2014) argue that if we aim at having teachers prepared to face the various challenges they meet in their everyday practice, we should be ready to address them as active professionals. Schön (1983) supports that professional learning equals reflective practice. More explicitly, we should encourage teachers to reflect on their previous representations and experiences and consider them capable to take decisions about their educational action. According to Elliot (1989)

(...) the teacher educator must always transmit his or her specialised knowledge as intrinsically problematic (...) In the final analysis the ultimate validation of specialised knowledge about education is that it enables educational

practitioners to discover better solutions to the complex practical problems they confront in realising educational values in action. (p. 86)

These approaches on teacher professional learning incorporate the notion of redefining the relation between theory and practice. Challenging the belief that theory produced outside school can lead teaching act in a linear and undisputable manner, they focus on establishing a bidirectional link, as they acknowledge the contribution of teachers in critically approaching, exploring and adapting theory through everyday school practice (Day & Gu, 2010; Elliot, 1989; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Fullan (2007) claims that unless “a culture of learning in context” is established in schools, “no incentive or qualification scheme by itself can possibly carry the day” (p. 292). Similarly, many researchers report that teachers’ reflecting on their own practice as well as their students’ action seem to have a positive impact on broaden the formers’ understanding both on their context and on their own work, arguing that this considerably contributes to their professional progress (Altrichter, 2005; Day & Gu, 2010; Fullan, 2007).

In accordance with the above, relevant research findings show that teachers’ involvement in participatory experiential sessions and reflective approaches encourages them to rethink their pre-existing perceptions and even to consider adapting their educational practices (Avgitidou, 2014; Day & Gu, 2010; Elliot, 1989). Zeichner and Liston (2014) claim that “viewing teachers as reflective practitioners assumes that teachers can both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice” (p. 5). This perspective is in line to Elliot’s (1991) belief that only through fully and explicitly understanding an educational situation as it evolves can we decide on the appropriate educational (re)action. Therefore teachers themselves can contribute in the introduction of innovative proposals and changes by reflecting on their practice. In this context, teachers take the role of active professionals who use action research rather than cookbook paradigms.

Reflective writing for professional evolution

Many researchers parallel the writing process with the evolution of thinking: Purposeful, systematic writing entails qualities applied in learning strategies, such as recollection, organising, revision, connectedness and selection. As reflective writing is considered a useful strategy to focus on self-practice, it is widely exploited in pre-service teachers training during their academic studies (Avgitidou, 2014; Hoover, 1994). Writing journals, critical events, lesson plans and reflective evaluations are some common forms of relevant training exercises included in contemporary academic curricula. Nevertheless, although, not equally popular, reflective writing can be also seen as a means towards professional

development for in-service teachers, helping them to focus on and reconsider important aspects of their educational action (Hoover, 1994).

Methodology

The purpose and the aims of the study

The main purpose of our study was to identify the role of reflective writing for teachers' professional development in the context of our research project. More explicitly we tried to find out:

- What does the analysis of the reflective written records teachers submitted reveals in relation to the evolution of their thinking and their ability to reflect on their contexts and their educational act?
- How is the record writing process evaluated by teachers themselves in relation to their professional development?

The research context

The study is part of a wider research that was carried out from October 2018 to June 2019. In the context of an anti-bias action research project, twelve educators from various backgrounds were theoretically and methodologically supported to use the Persona Dolls method as a research hypothesis for approaching matters of diversity and challenging prejudice and discrimination in their classrooms. More specifically, in the research participated nine preschool teachers from different public settings as action researchers, the researcher as a facilitator as well as two critical friends of the latter. The participant teachers were selected through snowball sampling (Mason, 2002). Among the most important requirements were their lack of previous systematic training on either action research or anti-bias education as well as their interest and willingness to commit themselves in the research purpose and process. Both the researcher and her two critical friends were preschool teachers having significant teaching and academic experience on the theoretical and methodological fields involved.

Participation in the research was voluntary. All participants were informed about the purpose, the methods and the procedure of the research and consented to promote its aims by honestly reporting data, following the process and collaborating with the research team. Finally, we were all committed in writing that the anonymity of the participating teachers would be fully respected, only the researcher would have full access to all data and all information shared or published would be used by solely for research purposes.

The research process lasted for almost a whole school year and was divided into four main phases (see Table 1) which included:

- training sessions
- collaborative activities and workshops

- educational interventions in teachers' settings
- systematic reflective writing
- regular reflection and feedback team meetings
- optional one-on-one support and feedback via phone or email

Table 1. The timetable

October – November 2018	November 2018 – January 2019	January – June 2019	June 2019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Selecting participants ▶ Initial communications ▶ Starting questionnaires ▶ Starting focus group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Training sessions: group activities and workshops related to the theoretical and methodological framework of the research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Educational interventions using the P.D. approach ▶ Observation and reflective writing ▶ Reflection and feedback group meetings ▶ Phone/email support ▶ On the spot visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Final interviews ▶ Final focus group & evaluation meeting

Introducing and supporting reflective writing...

Among all the activities they participated, teachers were initially involved in a variety of training sessions including experiential workshops and activities. Some of the main objectives of the process were to theoretically and methodologically familiarise them with reflective writing as a means to enhance their understandings. More specifically, they were introduced a) to the logic of critical incidents as tools to gain deeper insight into invisible aspects of their educational context (Woods, 1993; Tripp, 1993) and b) to the importance of recording their reflection on the educational interventions they would implemented as action researchers in their classrooms. As part of the following research phase, teachers were asked to systematically write down forms of:

- lesson plans and evaluation forms for every educational intervention they conducted using the Persona Dolls method as an anti-bias approach
- critical events (Woods, 1993; Tripp, 1993) they identified during their everyday programme, relevant to the research axes (i.e. diversity issues in their setting and anti-bias exploitation of the Persona Dolls method)

Copies of their written records were submitted to the researcher for analysis, while part of the material was discussed during the scheduled reflective/ feedback group meetings, where all teachers, the researcher facilitator and the two critical friends involved, shared their opinions in an attempt to broaden their theoretical and methodological perspectives. To further support teachers' effort to

approach reflective writing, they were encouraged to ask for extra bibliography or feedback communication via phone or email.

The research material

The material was collected throughout the research and more specifically from November 2018 to June 2019. It was drawn from various sources, both oral and written, to provide us with the most comprehensive overview and documentation of the issue under study. The data analysed were, therefore, the following:

- The questionnaires submitted by the teachers at the beginning of the research
- The written records they submitted (forms of critical events and educational interventions)
- Teachers' individual interviews at the end of the research project
- The focus group interview at the end of the research
- The researcher's journal

The research method

Action research was adopted as a basic methodological strategy, focusing on the reflective-critical analysis of data emerged through individual and collective reflective processes (Katsarou, 2016; Stenhouse, 1975). We used content analysis as our data was drawn from different sources. Thematic content analysis was used to come up with meaningful, evident-based answers to our research questions (Mason, 2002) as well as to understand the meaning participants attributed to the whole process (Patton, 1990). Quantitative content analysis was used to enrich our understandings by producing necessary measurable results about the frequency and intensity of the concepts that emerged from the thematic analysis (Wilson, 2016).

During the process, audio material was fully transcribed in order to have all our data in the form of a written text. Then, after multiple, systematic reading, the data were grouped into categories that met the principles of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 1990). Elements of grounded theory were used to reframe our thinking and lead us to new theoretical explanations based on our developing experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

The participant teachers

The nine participants in the research project were all quite experienced teachers, working in early childhood education from eleven to almost thirty years. At that time they were all teaching in Greek public kindergartens all over Attica. They were all university graduates, five of them holding a master's degree. They

had never been involved in a similar project before and they had no systematic training in issues related to the research axes. The analysis showed that all of them were interested and willing to participate in the action research process, mainly to enrich their knowledge and skills about the research topic.

Approaching the process...

As mentioned above, during the third phase of the research, teachers were invited to keep written records of critical events and of their educational interventions. More specifically, they were asked – through observing their students in their everyday school life and during P.D. sessions – to spot and write down interesting flashpoints related to the research axes (i.e. diversity issues arising and/or researching the value of the Persona Dolls method as an anti-bias approach). As far as the interventions were concerned, teachers had to write down the anti-bias lesson plans they designed following the P.D. session approach. To promote reflection on their writings, they were also asked to comment on critical events they identified as well as critically evaluate their interventions after each session they had conducted in their classroom. To facilitate and organise their writing they were given sample forms for both types of writing.

Data analysis shows that most teachers kept systematic records of the forms requested (see Table 2). Seven out of nine submitted at least fifteen forms for each type of record, which was the required for the number of interventions they were invited to carry out. Four teachers submitted more forms while two of them less – mainly due to absence from class or methodological difficulties.

Teachers submitted copies of their papers on a regular basis, although they followed their own schedule, as they could submit them either every week or within a month, so long as they were handed in before our upcoming group meeting. However, as the research progressed, most participants began to send their forms more frequently, often on a weekly basis, requesting, if possible, to receive a more immediate first feedback from the facilitator.

Table 2. Written records submitted and educational interventions made

Teachers	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	Totals
Critical events	3	17	15	16	16	15	15	19	11	127
Intervention forms (Lesson plans and evaluations)	8	16	16	16	15	16	15	15	13	130
Educational interventions	12	16	16	16	15	16	15	15	13	134

Challenges and dilemmas

Despite the initial training, writing proved to be a rather demanding process for the teachers. Studying the material revealed that a number of significant issues arose, unsettling participants' work routines while challenging their theoretical and methodological certainties. The most important difficulties they encountered are presented below.

As the project progressed, teachers seem to have realised that they had underestimated the time they needed for writing – both for describing the process/facts and adding reflective comments. In fact, they claim that they often had to try hard to “fit” the process into the already heavy schedule they had every day at school.

After a while I understood that it takes more (time) than I first thought. Not only in quantity (...) I mean you have to be concentrated there (...) (T5, interview)

They also acknowledge consistency and commitment as essential to avoid losing focus.

(...) when you are not consistent (with your writings), then it is very easy to lose it (...) (T1, interview)

Selecting noteworthy elements to write about and comment on often troubled the participants. Dilemmas arose, such as whether the incidents they identified could be characterised as critical, or whether the points they focused on during their educational interventions assessment were well selected.

(...) is what I am going to write, say, naïve, after all? And do I have to write something else that I did not see or did not understand or did not identify? (...) There I had the dilemma and the hesitation (...) (T7, interview)

At the same time, methodological issues emerged. Participants had to familiarize themselves with the use of necessary tools – digital recorders, sample forms etc – to facilitate and increase the validity of the writing process.

I found it difficult to record the session in written. I cannot handle the doll, talk to the children, watch everyone's reactions (especially non-verbal ones) and at the same time control everything that happens. I think I will lose important pieces (...) Maybe I need a recording tool (camera, voice recorder, mobile?). (T8, intervention form)

On the other hand, even when adapting such tools, they sometimes found it difficult to transfer their experience into writing.

When writing the forms, it was difficult for me that, as I had it as an image in my mind, (...) However, in order to bring it all to paper, I filtered it so much that I did not know what to write. (T9, interview)

Participants partially attributed their difficulty in adapting reflective writing to lack of sufficient or any previous experience in observing and reflecting on both their class and their own practice. Their remarks seem to be confirmed by the analysis and the association of the relevant data (e.g. a positive correlation is revealed between elements of their professional profile at the beginning of the research and the quality of the written texts they submitted). T7 characteristically mentions relevant difficulties in reflecting on the critical events she identified as well as on the educational interventions she carried out:

I could not evaluate what went well, what did not go well. These questions were very difficult for me. Or my thoughts. I could not, because I did not have them in order. That was where I was blocked (...) self-assessment (...) is a thing that we have not learnt, I have not learnt to do it, to record it. I know in myself if I did something well or I did not, I just always pass it (...)

Several more teachers shared similar comments either during our group meetings or in our one-on-one communications we had in the meantime. Interestingly, however, they also emphasise that they had not initially realised how challenging it would be for them to respond to the process.

Facing difficulties

Despite difficulties, all teachers were involved in the process of reflective writing. Most of them submitted the required number of forms – some of them even more – trying to be as consistent as possible in the research axes. Although, at the beginning, the quality of both the descriptions and the comments submitted were, in some cases, rather poor, the data analysis shows that, the participants gradually improved their ability to focus and reflectively comment on their writings. They all agree that this was neither a linear nor an effortless achievement. However, they acknowledge – not only during the research but also in retrospect – that their way towards reflection was supported through the action research procedures followed.

In fact, adopting a research approach either by using appropriate tools or by following a consistent and organized, yet flexible, course of action was recognized as significantly helpful, e.g.:

I found the audio recorder very useful. Because, during some sessions, I got lost with writing. (T4, interview)

The given form was necessary. (T2, interview)

(...) the fact that there was a repetition every week put me in the process of thinking about what I have written and needing to take an extra step which under other circumstances may exist as a thought, yet, would remain a thought. (T8, final focus group)

The fact that there was a commitment was very important. This led to a change of mentality, to a process that (...) I now cannot imagine I won't keep written records. (T3, final focus group)

Along with all of the above, feedback and collaboration were considered the cornerstones in their attempt to first comprehend the significance of reflecting on the educational process observed and then realising the need to adopt it themselves. Data analysis, clearly shows that teamwork meetings, in particular, played a key role in supporting teachers' attempt to interpret their writings by enriching their viewpoint. The researcher's journal is full of examples where the sharing of views turned out to offer the group members a lot of new perspectives and ideas, until then unrevealed to the writers themselves.

(...) comments from critical friends that were made during the meetings, these reflections (...) I think helped me a lot. I mean, maybe it's very important (...) the concerns that arose from our meetings in unblocking some things in order to evaluate them more objectively. (T3, focus group)

Nevertheless, more than feedback, teachers argue that open and collaborative interaction within the group offered them encouragement and empowerment, acting as an antidote to isolation and unilateral thinking.

(...) as soon as feedback meetings took place (...) would go ahead again with confidence (...) if there was no team feedback I might, say, really get stuck and not be able to move on. (T5, focus group)

(...) the fact that we were there and I listened to the difficulties and the conveniences and the way they were handled by (...) the rest of the team was definitely very helpful. Because when you see that ah, I was not the only one who made this mistake or I was not the only one doing it this way etc is inspiring (...)

Between group meetings, the option for feedback on an individual level via phone or email communication also proved to be particularly helpful in facilitating participants to enhance their effort to develop their ability to reflect on their writing.

(...) the fact that I sent you something and I had a feedback within a few hours. (...) written word very much as a means, it stays with me more maybe than oral. (...) it worked very well for me. (T2, interview)

(...) our discussions made me understand exactly and to the point (...) where my mistakes were, think towards the right direction and then made me feel that I can and act alone and make mistakes (...) (T8, interview)

There also appears to be a relationship between this feeling of support and encouragement that teachers reported receiving in the time leading up to our next group meeting with the finding that there was an increase in the frequency of handouts from mid-survey onwards, which emerged from the analysis.

Developing new skills and understandings

The analysis of the submitted forms (critical events and educational intervention forms) showed that as the research project progressed, teachers gradually exercised their writing skills, evolving the quality of their descriptive texts and their reflective comments. Along with them, they developed further professional skills, such as carefully observing their students and the educational process and focusing on important incidents relevant to specific axes – in this case the research axes.

I chose this as a critical event because I think there was a rift in the team. Although all year long we talk and “work” respect for diversity, it seems that was not enough. Stereotypical perceptions remain and are manifested in various ways. (...) I think the team needs to manage what we have discussed once again. I would also like to focus on how the whole team will respond to the issue (...) (T3, Critical event form, 15/4/2019)

Encouraging them to keep journal notes and exploit them to help themselves think critically about the context they teach seems to have opened up new perspectives on how they perceive their own action.

During writing, things came to me that at that time I might have forgotten and not given a basis for. So when I started writing I realised even more things, something that I’ve never done before (...) I have rarely dealt with observing and writing about my children’s attitudes and behaviours (...) Now it’s a little more (...) spontaneous. Something I didn’t do before in the classroom and it definitely helps me in all my educational part in the classroom (...) (T5, interview)

Shifting their attention from technical and methodological issues to the use of writing as a means of deepening their understandings on the educational process helped them gain a clearer insight on their own representations and practice. As they argue, they were, thus, led to re-examine and re-evaluate the practices they adopt. T8 comments:

(...) I managed to reflect on myself and the way I position myself in the classroom, towards the children, on the issues we manage together, on how we manage them. I have a more objective picture of who I am now, right now in the classroom. I became an observer of myself.

Through reflecting on their written records, alternative interpretations arose, while preconceived notions were often revised in the light of new realisations.

The fact that you involve yourself into the process of reflection. That's where writing helps. There you are forced to see what is happening because at the end of the day you may say "I shouldn't have done that. I would do this differently. But it stops there. It stops there, you don't change it after all. (...) You won't change it. Whereas if you have it written, you don't miss anything, you are exposed (...) it is what ultimately makes you see yourself. Against everything (...) And how you are as an educator towards diversity and a programme that is related to prejudices. And how you manage them. (T8, interview)

Changes in their mindset inevitably affected their practice. Exploiting their emerging understandings of their context, role and practice, the participating teachers claim to have reviewed and, consequently, sought to reform their previous pedagogic action by making from minor adjustments to even significant adaptations.

(...) little by little I started to build, to build, to build, to see the mistakes I had made, I do not know how much I succeeded, how much I did not succeed. In this whole process I saw a lot of things. I probably saw things in my class (...) that came out and I would not see them any other way (...) (T3, interview)

While in their submissions clearly focus on issues of handling diversity as well evaluating the use of the research hypothesis to address bias, reflecting in writing seem to have contributed to the development of their ability to assess teaching tools, methods and ideas in a more critical way. Through adopting an action research approach they were involved in the process of reviewing theory in such a way that they started discovering new connections with the reality they experience every day at school and building practice-based correlations.

This was again a new dimension for me, even though I have been involved in action research in the past, during my training. But getting out of it all, you leave it behind. Everyday life is far from the theory and I think this all put me back in this process. The fact that theory is related to practice. And it is up to us not to let it go. (N6, Interview)

It is also considered important that the participants themselves were aware of the process of their self-development and they could even recognise its step-by-step course throughout the action research process. In fact, they argue that it was mainly through reflective writing that they managed to better understand and be able to address their context needs.

The course was evolutionary. I realised that (...) it is a thing that is being built day by day. It is built session after session but it is also built with what you do next. I realised that what I was writing during the lesson was not just a recording of what the children were saying but it was something you had to read two or three times, record, delete, rewrite to find out what it was that finally appeared during the session. (N3 interview)

By the end of the research N3 verbalises a thought about reflective writing that seems to be accepted by almost all participating teachers:

My misconception was that writing was just one thing. It was not just a note-keeping, in my opinion. It was a lot of things, a lot, a lot of reflection needed to write. (...) In the process, I realised that this was not just about the programme (...) but it has to do with what I understood from my interventions. (N3, interview)

According to such an approach, reflection on writing moves away from its use as a tool for the purpose of a topic-centred assessment, highlighting its value as a transformative experience in participants' professional identities.

Discussion

In the context of an anti-bias action research project the use of reflective writing proved to have significantly contributed to teachers professional development by opening up new perspectives for them. The analysis showed that teachers often perceived the writing process as a multi-level challenge. Although at the beginning of the research they were all aware that reflective writing would be an integral part of the research and they were eager to be involved in it, it emerged that implementing it was neither a simple nor a familiar process for them. During their participation in the research project, a number of practical, methodological and theoretical issues arose. Some teachers reported that the whole process was rather demanding and time-consuming, while others identified their difficulty in meeting methodological requirements, such as how to focus on research axes, how to decide on what is important to write about, how to describe experience in writing and how to reflectively comment on their writing.

To respond to arising challenges and dilemmas various options were exploited. Adherence to an organised and consistent, yet, open and flexible research planning was recognised as helpful for systematizing the work of all participants. Teamwork in the group meetings supported teachers' effort to overcome problems and dilemmas and offered feedback and encouragement. Similarly, individual communication with the researcher who adopted the role of facilitator-critical friend was acknowledged as a valuable choice.

Session after session, teachers devoted more time and effort to adopting reflective writing. Their commitment was fostered by their growing belief that this particular practice offered them prospects and opportunities they did not expect to have when entering the research project. As most of them mention, their initial expectations were mainly limited to exploring the research hypothesis and familiarising themselves with the anti-bias approach. However, they began to realise that their involvement in such a process promoted their professional evolution in a more comprehensive way. More specifically, it was evident that writing, as introduced in the context of this research, promoted opportunities for teachers to:

- challenge and enrich their knowledge and understanding of their students
- observe and reflect on the way they act as professionals
- (re)discover connections between theory and practice
- understand the contribution of reflective writing to supporting and improving the educational process.

It emerges that, even if not intended upon designing the process, the research hypothesis has eventually functioned more as a motive and a vehicle for teachers' professional development, supported by encouraging critical thinking and reflective writing than as an ultimate goal. We recognise that the findings of the study is rather context-limited. However we strongly believe that a larger qualitative action research focused on reflective writing as a means of teachers' professional development would be of great interest.

Conclusions

This study tried to highlight how reflective writing contributed to teachers' professional development within a larger action research project, which focused on evaluating the use of the Persona Dolls method in addressing anti-bias issues. Following the research planning, participants were invited to theoretically and methodologically approach and adopt reflective writing in order critically focus on the research hypothesis. As part of the process they were requested to observe their context and their pedagogical action – both during the educational interventions they carried out using the Persona Dolls method and during everyday life in the classroom, identify critical events or other noteworthy issues, somehow relevant to the research axe, to take written notes and to try to critically reflect on

them in writing. Although participating teachers faced challenges and dilemmas they claim that the support provided has considerably helped them to overcome them. Among the most important supportive elements they acknowledge were teamwork during the regular group feedback meetings as well as individual feedback given as an option by the facilitator via phone or email. Through observation, reflecting on their writings and exchanging views and opinions with the rest of the research team, teachers were led to critically think about their pedagogical perceptions and reconsider their practice. We believe that the above findings could enrich the dialogue on the contribution of reflective writing to teachers' professional development, especially in collaborative action research contexts.

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