



Problems and the Liberating Power of Reflective Practice

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Abstract: *The reflective model of professional learning has a strong influence on the development of educational practice and curriculum in an educational institution. The development of reflective capacities requires a lot of time, dedication and reflection; therefore, many teachers are more inclined towards instructive forms of professional development. Reflection and reflectivity are key elements of achieving responsible and ethical practice as well as the development of teacher autonomy. For the development of such a practice, it is necessary to develop a collaborative atmosphere of trust so that teachers decide to openly discuss their doubts and problems with their colleagues. Therefore, the development of a collaborative culture of the institution, i.e., the reduction or elimination of hierarchy, is an important prerequisite for the establishment of reflective practice in an educational institution. The paper examines several challenges faced by teachers in the process of developing their own reflective competencies and reflective practice. Reflective practice can be a powerful liberating force, but it is always a process that needs to be coordinated with the individually different possibilities of the institution and the individuals in it.*

Keywords: *Educational practice, discussion, reflectivity, collaborative culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous advantages of the reflective model of professional learning compared to the traditional, instructional one. Ultimately, the reflective model of professional learning has the transformational potential of educational practice and is therefore much more effective in the process of developing this curriculum practice in an educational institution. Fanghanel (2004) emphasizes the value of reflective practice and reflectivity in eliminating the gap between theory and practice in curriculum interpretation. He points out that reflection is the link between theory (formal knowledge) and practice (professional experience). He symbolically describes it as the 'pearl grit in the oyster of practice and education' (p. 576).

The experience of participating in a reflective model of professional learning, if well facilitated, can convince a large percentage (more than 80%) of professionals that changes within their organization are possible (Redmond, 2006). This is significant, i.e., encouraging information, because the process of qualitative changes itself is largely unpredictable, uncertain and long-lasting, and as Stol and Fink (2000, 37) point out, it is often painfully slow. Change and development always require time, energy and commitment (Bolton, 2010), for which many teachers, and even entire teams, do not have enough patience. Therefore, many of them prefer to adhere to the instructional model of professional development, which, at least on the surface, provides quick results. This is contrary to reflective practice which has fluid results that are quite difficult to measure and always appear with a considerable time lag. There are also other features of the instructional model of professional development which can explain its popularity in certain circles of practice, i.e., their "stickiness" for a certain percentage of teachers. They offer them clearly defined instructions and are therefore simpler, faster and less demanding than those that require teachers to deeply examine the very roots of their practice, themselves and, if necessary, the shortcomings of the organizations in which they work (Bolton, 2010). However, it is recognition, i.e., awareness of problems in practice and willingness to discuss them, that is the beginning of their elimination. Searching for problems in practice, and not avoiding or suppressing them, i.e., joint recognition, acceptance and resolution of problems and dilemmas of practitioners in a certain institution, is an indicator of its true development.

Therefore, it is justified to say that the answers to complex situations in educational practice often lie in its thorough “cleaning”, and they begin precisely with current dilemmas and concrete problems. A teacher's own professional dilemmas (doubts, challenges, problems, etc.) cannot be removed by someone else, but they must do it themselves. Of course, this process is much more promising if it is provided with a reflective environment, i.e., quality facilitation, but in any case, its creative, thought and emotional contribution to the elimination of one's own dilemmas is of crucial importance.

Other recent authors, such as Hopkins (2001), Stoll and Fink (2000), point out that a successful educational institution is one in which dilemmas and problems are known and accepted, rather one in which they are suppressed, marginalized, and avoided. Educational institutions are therefore not divided into those that do not have problems and those that have them but are divided into those in which there is no awareness of problems, which are suppressed and ignored, and those in which this awareness exists and concrete problems are actively sought and treated as natural and expected (Fullan, 1993).

It follows from this discussion that successful educational institutions do not have fewer problems, but only deal with them more successfully (Stoll and Fink, 2000). The consequence of this is that the former approach the complex educational practice superficially and keep the old, well-established way of working, while the latter are constantly searching for new strategies to discover problems and ensure interventions that would lead to their elimination.

Authors such as Fullan (1993, 1999), Hopkins (2001) and others emphasize that failure to recognize and avoid real problems is perhaps the greatest enemy of productive changes, i.e. improvement of educational practice. In this sense, Fullan (1993) justifiably calls problems in educational practice *Friends*.

However, accepting dilemmas and problems as a basis for learning and development is characteristic of a learning organization, not a traditional educational institution. Therefore, it is not surprising that some advanced educational systems, such as the one in Finland, rely much more on the benefits of reflective practice than others (such as the one in Great Britain - more on this in Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen, 2006). Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen (2006) point out that it is the advanced systems that promote reflective practice the most, relying on the power of its liberating force.

2. REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN THE ROLE OF STRENGTHENING THE PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY AND AUTONOMY OF TEACHERS

Daily educational practice is strongly determined by the values that individual teachers incorporate into their practice, of which they themselves may not be fully aware. Their practice reflects these values even when they themselves are unable to articulate, i.e., verbalize them. In a way, Bolton (2010) argues, we are what we do because our actions speak louder than words. Professional integrity, according to the said author, can be defined by the extent to which a teacher's values are coherently integrated into their daily practice, although many teachers have never explicitly defined their own values. In this sense, reflective practice can contribute to strengthening the professional integrity of teachers.

Reflection and reflectivity are key elements of achieving responsible and ethical practice, although there are certain arguments against them. One of them, as explained by Copeland et al. (according to Bolton, 2010), is the lack of time because it is always necessary to set aside a certain amount of time for reflective activities. The problem, the author continues, can also be the heavy workload of teachers with their daily duties in the organization of educational process, i.e., teaching, as well as their demotivation. Demotivation, of course, can be the result of a number of objective and subjective circumstances, but in any case, it does not represent a good basis for the introduction of additional activities, i.e., obligations. However, paradoxically, precisely this (over)load or the subjective feeling of over-engagement regarding daily duties further strengthens the need to introduce joint reflections in the collective (Hedberg 2009). However, it is especially important to ensure conditions in which reflective activities can lead to the improvement of a particular segment of practice or its entirety, which is not something of which formalized and routinized meetings of teachers who do not encourage active (emotional and intellectual) engagement are in favour. Equally, the perspective of joint reflections is not supported by the hierarchical structure of the institution, which, according to certain research (Slunjski, 2018), is one of the most prominent neuralgic points, i.e., key obstacles in the attempts to improve all aspects of educational practice and the educational practice as a whole.

Practicing reflective practice is one of the possible ways to eliminate the problems faced by teaching professions, which are manifested in their devaluation and increasing alienation. As Winter et al. (1999) remind us, at the end of the 1980s, in many professions, a trend of decreasing autonomy of professionals began, to be replaced by a practice in which decisions are made more and more mechanically, i.e., in which their professional expertise was not valued enough. The answer to this can be offered precisely by a reflective paradigm that can contribute to the defence of professional values, i.e., strengthen the autonomy of professionals in a context that transforms them from artists to operatives (Winter et al., 1999).

Reflective practice, according to Bolton (2010), can provide relatively safe and confidential ways of exploring experiences that are otherwise difficult to communicate. In this sense, the author continues, it is possible to eliminate wrong assumptions, ideological illusions, racial, social and cultural biases and inequalities, and to question one's own behaviours that may marginalize or otherwise disrespect others.

However, in order for a person to be critical of their own personal, social and political situation, they must, at least to a certain extent, be able to stand outside of that situation. Because, as Bolton (2010, 58) explains, “no one can criticize a paradigm as long as he is in it: no sailor can start a yacht by blowing into its sails”. The cited author explains that all people wear culturally coloured lenses through which they view the world, and if they want to see the world as it really is, they must be able to see it beyond those lenses. In practice, this means moving away from what seems obvious, in favour of what seems possible (and sometimes not even that). In order to achieve this, a person should take a “step back”, i.e., try to look at the problem from a fresh point of view, from a new perspective, based on a new set of questions.

3. UNCERTAINTY, NON-LINEARITY AND UNPREDICTABILITY OF REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Exposing one's professional practice, i.e., one's deepest beliefs, doubts and problems, can be seen as a threat for the teacher, but it can be both bad and good at the same time. As explained by Fook et al. (2006), critical reflection refers to the “unearthing” of deep-rooted assumptions that are embedded in the culture itself. If the “excavation” of these assumptions is too unpleasant and even painful, it has a negative effect on the individual's learning. That's why the “trick” is in establishing a balance that involves minimizing risk and maximizing learning. However, there is no universal “measure” for establishing such a balance, because at some point different teachers are able to accept and bear different levels of frustration caused by the discussion about their assumptions, i.e., beliefs, doubts and problems.

Accepting one's own uncertainty as an opportunity for new interpretations and insights, i.e. the teacher's openness to self-examination can result in sudden “bursts of understanding” of something that was already in plain sight, but never noticed before (Cunliffe, 2004). These enigmatic and often sudden insights mostly happen after the teachers allow themselves to stop thinking in their own way, i.e., they step for a moment away from themselves and begin to look at reality in a new way. In these circumstances, they become open to a new examination of everyday situations as well as of their knowledge, feelings and understanding.

Encouraging reflective practice is akin to handling fireworks, Bolton (2010) argues. The author uses this symbolic comparison to illustrate the uncertainty that often accompanies reflective activities: fireworks will probably go off when the explosive part of the device burns out. But the direction or the way it will explode into colour, light and sound is always unknown. Many headmasters (i.e., facilitators of the change process) avoid reflective activities precisely because of their uncertain and unpredictable nature, trying to avoid the possible problems they could produce. For this reason, they choose to keep the collectives, i.e., the institutions they lead, in non-reflective structures. However, it is not possible to transform practice with a “magic wand” (Bolton, 2010), i.e., without deep and committed personal investment. And even if there were magic wands, the author continues, change based on uncritical and thoughtless assumptions would very quickly prove to be non-developmental.

Certain uncertainty, typical of reflective practice, makes it difficult for many teachers and collectives to decide to embark on the process of mastering such practice at all. Paradoxically, this initial uncertainty grows further as a person's knowledge gained from their own experience increases. On the other hand, teachers wish for security, i.e., they want to base their work on certain, i.e., proven work

methods. They had the opportunity to meet and adopt many of them already during their initial education. However, the goal of modern education is not to acquire a large amount of information, but to train oneself to navigate the world of changing information and master the tools of permanent learning.

Of course, the need to establish a reflective practice is difficult to reconcile with the perception of an educational institution as a system characterized by linearity, predictability and rectilinearity, and in which some completely objective, routinized and measurable accountability systems are in force (Fook, 2015). And if it were such a system, it would be completely justified to expect uniformity, infallibility and flawlessness from the teachers who work professionally in it. Because in technocratic systems, the quality of employees' work is viewed precisely from the perspective of their (unified) technical skills, for the development of which subjective processes of critical reflection are not necessary. However, if we lean toward the understanding of an educational institution as a living system that is largely unpredictable, non-linear and often chaotic, in which there are multiple systems of responsibility that are also subject to various contextual factors, practicing subjective critical reflection, i.e., establishing a reflective practice not only becomes possible, but it becomes a permanent imperative of quality development.

4. LEADING REFLECTIONS IN THE COLLECTIVE: CONTROL AND/OR TRUST?

One of the challenges in providing support for reflective activities is the assessment of the level of control that is required and useful for such activities. While, on the one hand, there are shortcomings in the structuring of teachers' thinking, on the other hand, in order to be critically reflective, teachers must question themselves and face themselves. And in order to succeed in this, they should not be overly directed. In this sense, Bolton (2010) discusses the so-called *guided reflection* that can result in productive discussions and enable teachers to gain insight. Here, the role of the leader or mentor is focused on creating a sufficiently *safe environment* with *clear boundaries*. It provides teachers with conditions in which they can be brave enough to remain insecure and doubt themselves, and at the same time, to gain confidence in their own strength and intelligence and to ask developmentally relevant questions and seek creative and productive answers to them. It is a learning environment that is safe enough for teachers to take the risk of questioning those issues that they do not normally discuss.

For this, as evidenced by some other authors such as Lieberman and Miller (2002), it is necessary to strengthen collaborative relationships in the collective, which begin with the establishment of mutual trust. Mutual trust is a necessary precondition for participation in open discussions, in which teachers often need to “unpack their suitcase of years of unexplored skills, practices and beliefs” (Stoll and Fink, 2000, 80).

It is about the existence of a sense of psychological security of the teacher necessary to be able to admit a mistake, a misunderstanding or an outdated method of work to oneself and to others, without the risk that this admission will inevitably result in a feeling of discomfort and failure. This psychological security, which Stoll and Fink (2000) call a *safetynet*, encourages teachers to open dialogue, i.e., to take the risk of exposing their opinions, attitudes, beliefs and ways of working to the judgments of others. This feeling of not being threatened and being accepted, despite differences of opinion, is achieved by promoting a culture of conversation, i.e., a dialogue in which one's attitudes or actions are analysed, judged and possibly criticized, which does not mean that one's personal integrity is attacked. Senge et al. (2003, 198) claim that “psychological safety can only be built if an environment that contributes to safety is created in which employees gradually build togetherness and trust”. Because, according to the mentioned authors, trust is the basis of a true learning process and it cannot be built directly, but the conditions that contribute to trust must be created. And if that trust exists, i.e., if the teachers assess the environment in which reflective activities are carried out as safe enough, they begin to present and discuss not only questions that have a direct connection with the improvement of individual segments and the whole practice, but also about their own anxieties, stress, fatigue, work (over)load and the like. In this sense, reflective activities can provide teachers not only with an enlightening perspective but also with a kind of emotional refuge. During reflective activities, certain ethical dilemmas may arise in connection with the incorrect practice of one's own colleague, i.e., doubt whether such practice should be reported, Bolton (2010) points out. The essence of this

dilemma is whether the collegial atmosphere should ensure confidentiality for teachers, or, in the function of a higher goal, it is justified to report those aspects of the practice of our colleagues that we consider unacceptable.

In each of the above examples, control gives way to the development of trust, quality relationships in the collective and collaborative culture of the institution. However, the creation of a learning environment based on the collaborative relationships of teachers, i.e., the collaborative culture of the institution, cannot be achieved in a short time nor does it happen by chance.

5. CRITICAL REFLECTION IN PRACTICE

Fook (2015) describes the way in which the model of critical reflection is realized in practice itself through several elements. According to the author, it is always a small group (usually up to ten people), who at the beginning of the session present that part of the practice that seems crucial to them in some way. This serves as working material, i.e., as “raw material” for thinking. Then the process is structured in two phases: the first is analytical and in it they try to examine and expose the assumptions that are hidden behind what the participants said earlier. The second phase focuses on the search for possibilities in which these hidden assumptions can be translated into new ways of understanding practice, new powers of the participants and new ways in which they could change their environment.

In short, it is always a small group of participants who help each other to think critically about their practice, in a confidential environment, which is facilitated by a facilitator who is familiar with this approach. Quality modelling, as Fook (2015) points out, is vital for establishing a group climate of trust and ensuring egalitarian interaction of participants.

It is especially important, the author continues, for the leader to provide conditions in which each participant can feel capable of articulating the main assumptions that were discovered in the discussion and that he can identify specific areas of learning related to these assumptions, which they will deal with themselves. It is also important for the leader to draw out some connecting points of the discussion, in order to establish a connection between the personal and social experiences of the participants. Next, the leader encourages the participants to reflect on what they discussed at the beginning and to present their revised 'theories of practice' with the aim of devising specific practice strategies from them. The point is that they are actively involved in the whole process, and with their thinking contribute to the creation of their own, personal theory of practice.

During the process of introducing practitioners to professional learning through reflective activities, and especially in its initial stages, difficulties are possible at various levels. For example, many practitioners expect a structure and specific instructions on how they should work, if they want to improve their practice. Likewise, for some, the feeling of insecurity and unclear responsibility presents a significant problem. They wonder whose responsibility it is for the changes that are discussed at the joint analyses. This is not really surprising, because many of them have had bad experiences with innovations that they have undertaken before and which were not supported by the collective (pedagogue, headmaster or anyone else) but by themselves. Such problems are usually an indicator of the absence of a clear vision of the institution's development, as well as more serious problems in its management, which are discussed in more detail in certain studies (Slunjski 2016, 2018).

In a certain number of cases, the atmosphere at joint reflections can be “excessively revealing,” if there is too sudden or excessive insistence on a critical discourse, which is not accompanied by realistic possibilities, i.e., honest insights of the participants. Then the joint reflections can resemble a kind of *reality program* (Macfarlane and Gurlay (2009)), in which the participants begin to unreservedly expose, i.e., excessively criticize themselves and their actions, express remorse for earlier failures in their work etc., as if everything done previously was either negative or as if remorse is a measure of progress. All these difficulties, if the process started and if it is managed in an appropriate way, are reduced or disappear over time in favour of constructive discussions on concrete issues aimed at achieving betterment, the democratization of the process or, in general, the development of practice.

However, Fook (2015) allows for the possibility that critical reflection is not suitable for everyone, i.e., that its culture and values may not be compatible with some people. However, the author underlines, it allows the participants a feeling of “liberation” from established assumptions about what their “professional” practice should be, in favour of knowledge about how they can (re)construct their professional practice themselves. Precisely in this sense, reflective practice can be a powerful liberating force.

6. CONCLUSION

Although it contains many advantages compared to the classic, instructional model of professional learning, the reflective model is still underused in practice. There are several reasons for this, most prominent being its unpredictable nature and the time it takes to conduct it. Furthermore, its results can only be evaluated after a certain time, which can be several years. And finally, it requires intellectual, social and creative engagement. However, the reflective model of professional development enables the detection of problems and the teachers' focus on precisely those structures that represent a hindrance in the development of their educational practice and curriculum. It helps them develop completely new tools for understanding and developing educational practice that relies on their research and reflective capacities. This is evidenced by the experiences of more advanced educational systems that rely mostly on the benefits of developing reflectivity and reflective practice. Reflective practice also contributes to strengthening the professional integrity and autonomy of teachers, as indispensable values of the professional habitus of a modern teacher. But in order for it to become possible, it is necessary to systematically develop a collaborative culture of an educational institution based on quality relationships and a collaborative culture that excludes rigid hierarchy. For the establishment of reflective practice, the teacher's willingness to acquire new knowledge based on critical reflection is often crucial. The development of such skills presupposes quality leadership with respect for the unique culture of each institution and the specific capabilities of each individual. In other words, there is no universal measure or unique “recipe” for the stimulation of reflective processes and the development of reflective practice, but it is always a collaborative and research process.

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