

***Making a Real Difference in Physical Education:
The Contribution of Reflection in Initial Conceptions of the Teaching
Profession***

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Abstract

In Physical Education literature, reflective practice has been praised through its integration into curriculum programs. Especially in initial teacher education (ITE), the path to follow aims to overcome the barriers imposed by behavioral and technicist approaches, refraining from any critical thinking, questioning or autonomy to both teachers and students. Given the relevance of reflection to access new lens to view teachers practice and alter their perspectives, the purpose of this study was to comprehend the contribution of reflection in changing, or not, the understandings that future teachers have about teaching practices in Physical Education. A total of one hundred and twenty-two participants from the first year of a master's program in Physical Education were included in this study, during the 2021/2022 academic year. Data collection was carried out through individual reflections of teaching professionalism curricular unit. A deep familiarization with the data was conducted and central themes were generated using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results showed that: i) future teachers have a limited conception in the initial phase of their training, which is shaped through reflection stimulated throughout the semester; ii) reflection allowed an understanding of pedagogical practice focused on reflective practice, adapting to the contexts diversity. These results indicate the need for ITE to promote spaces for reflection among professionals, who consider continuous critical reflection, in order to integrate it into daily professional practice. Therefore, it will be possible to guarantee quality in Physical Education, which effectively contributes to students' development as critical and participatory citizens.

Keywords: Reflection, Initial Teacher Education, Physical Education, Teaching Profession

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Introduction

Teacher education programs play a critical role in shaping the capabilities, attitudes and conceptions of future educators. A straightforward look at professional legacies reveals that teachers have oscillated noticeably between a mission of reproducing the system and one of social transformation and progress. In both cases, they often operated under a logic that functionalizes teaching activity, frequently positioning themselves as agents who comply with instructions without questioning them.

Little attention has been given to the significance that initial training programs can have in developing a reflective and critical attitude. However, there is an evident dedication to research the impact of reflection in the teaching profession. Understanding how complex the process of a teacher's training is requires starting with an investigation in the initial phase, where initial conceptions and reflective awareness reveal the lenses through which future teachers will interpret new knowledge.

Reflection in the Physical Education Teacher Education Programs

The global landscape of education is constantly evolving, influenced by diverse factors such as technological advancements, shifting societal needs, and changing educational policies. In this dynamic environment, the ability to reflect critically on one's practices and adapt to new challenges becomes increasingly essential. As such, initial teacher education programs must equip future educators with the reflective skills necessary to navigate these complexities and foster inclusive and effective learning environments.

However, the scenario is not as bright as expected. In fact, teacher education programs are still battling to overcome technical approaches. As so, teachers were only focused on technical aspects and did not consider student's needs, acting like "robots".

In the field of education, despite the definition of reflection is ambiguous and not clearly defined (Jay & Johnson, 2002; Zeichner & Liston, 2013), its power and impact on initial teacher education is significant. In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance and need of reflective practices within initial teacher education frameworks (Minott, 2019; Zeichner, 1983).

Reflection continually emerges as a suggested way of helping practitioners better understand what they know and do, as they develop their knowledge through reconsidering what they learn in practice. Reflection, then, places an emphasis on learning through questioning and investigation to lead to a development of understanding. Therefore, is seen as a key element of building a 'self' and developing an ongoing need for professional development (Martínez & Collado, 2019). As such, Lizana and García (2022) affirm that is essential to promote systematic and conscious reflective processes, where teachers strive to develop their capacity to the fullest and also gain and understanding of their own professional practice.

Accordingly to recent investigations, it seems consensual that initial teacher training programs fail to prepare future teachers for the multiplicity of situations that arise in the real context of practice, much less to provide all the content and strategies required throughout their teaching career (Crawford et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it is recognized that the preparation and development of reflective teachers has been one of the goals of these programs, enabling the training of future educators being based on effective decision-making

and the ability to translate and adjust pedagogical knowledge to the real practice context (Zeichner, 1986).

In the specific context of Physical Education, reflection has been one of the fundamental and central elements for improving teacher effectiveness in student learning (Larrivee, 2008). This is why many current theories and empirical evidence have emphasized the relevance of reflection in teaching (Marshall, 2019).

If we consider the existing research on Physical Education pedagogical practices, educational aspirations often remain unrealized in practice. Studies demonstrate that teachers may place more emphasis on maintaining high levels of physical activity than on what students actually learn (Quennerstedt, 2019). Also, this subject may be perceived merely as a break from academic subjects where students can let steam off (Morgan & Hansen, 2008), and teachers may use direct instruction as their predominant pedagogical approach to deliver the entire depth of the curriculum.

In the initial training for Physical Education, although it has been dominated by technical rationality (Schön, 1983) and behavioral models (Zeichner, 1983), reflection has gained the importance it deserves (Tsangaridou & O'Sullivan, 1994). The recent contribution by Fernández et al. (2022) highlights the attempt to break away from traditional trends in Physical Education, which are exclusively centered on the body, favoring a deeper understanding of how practice develops through reflection. Ultimately, this discussion seeks to illuminate the path toward creating a generation of educators who are not only skilled practitioners but also critical thinkers and changemakers capable of fostering equity and excellence in diverse educational settings.

In addition to enhancing professional capacities (Tsangaridou & O'Sullivan, 1997), the reflective dimension in the initial training of teachers triggers conscious, systematic, and deliberate decision-making, through which educators can cyclically review their practices, aiming to achieve high standards of quality in Physical Education teaching. Moreover, there has been recognition of the importance of continuing to strive for a more critical and democratic Physical Education, where reflection is a fundamental basis of pedagogical practice (Brasó i Rius & Torredadella Flix, 2018).

For this reason, it is crucial that educational institutions training teachers, in this case for Physical Education, stimulate students' reflective capacity and promote its importance, fostering ongoing monitoring and evaluation of practice.

Considering that reflection serves as powerful tool for prospective Physical Education teachers, by enabling them to critically analyze, understand and adapt their teaching, this study was conducted through the first semester in a specific Physical Education Teacher Education scenario and examined how reflection can impact the initial conceptions that students in initial training have about the teaching profession.

Methodology

Context

This study was conducted in the Faculty of Sports of University of Porto (FADEUP) , during the 2021/2022 academic year, more specifically throughout the first semester of the Master's degree in Physical Education Teaching in Primary and Secondary Education.

FADEUP is characterized as an educational context of good practices, where the development and encouragement of reflection and critical thinking among future Physical Education teachers are constant and permanent in the curriculum plan.

Within the scope of Teaching Professionalism curricular unit, the students were often called upon to reflect, individually or in groups, and to write evaluative documents at the end of each task. At the end of the first semester, they were asked to create a final reflection illustrating how they felt they were “learning to be teachers”, by mentioning any changes in their understandings and positions regarding the teaching profession.

Participants

In the 2021/2022 academic year, the 122 students enrolled in the Teaching Professionalism curricular unit elaborated a final written reflection. Despite the association of this final document with a specific curricular unit, they were also invited to reflect on the contribution of the entire semester to their professional development.

Data Collection

The data emerged from the final and individual reflections of the 122 participants. Document analysis, as a research method, is particularly applicable to qualitative studies, which produce rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization or program (Stake, 1995). Therefore, this method adapts to our investigation purposes.

Written documents can serve a variety of purposes, such as: a) provide data on the context within which research participants operate; b) suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed as part of the research; c) provide supplementary research data; d) provide a means of tracking change and development; e) documents can be examined as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources (Bowen, 2009).

Document analysis is recognized as a source in which the researcher can obtain evidence that support the participant's statements, with a permanent access and has a low financial cost, providing greater accessibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Moreover, this type of analysis is reported as a non-reactive source, allowing information to be obtained after long periods of time and written reflections can be considered as a natural contextualized source of information (Kripka et al., 2015).

The data collected through the analysis of the final reflections allows to verify the contribution of reflection in initial education training, but also to understand whether there are significant changes in their thoughts and conceptions about the teaching profession. This

was possible by skimming (superficial examination), reading (through examination) and interpreting (Bowen, 2009) students reflections.

Data Analysis

The analysis was guided by the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006) due to the use of thematic analysis. Each phase of the coding process and theme development ensured the evolution of the themes was clear and traceable, which helped ensure the rigor of the research.

Familiarization with the data was achieved through repeated readings of the documents, complemented with initial annotations. Subsequently, the documents were read line by line, and the initial codes were written in a column attached to the respective document. Major patterns were sought throughout the data set, grouping them into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A more inductive and data-driven approach was emphasized, acknowledging the role of the researchers in the co-creation of the themes.

The quotes added to the prose of this analysis were reread in their original context to ensure that their representations were a credible reflection of what was written. Finally, names were assigned to the themes, identifying their respective essence, so that the excerpts were coherent and internally consistent within each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012).

Trustworthiness

Given the qualitative nature of the study, this investigation was not developed by sustaining universal generalizations and unidirectional patterns. Our investigation team guaranteed a continuous evaluation (peer debriefing), through periodic meetings to discuss points of view and review the investigation procedures in a critical perspective.

Besides all this, the questioning of formulated ideas and a permanent discussion of personal conceptions were also taken into the investigator's consideration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, a permanent combination between the data and the investigator's interpretations was carried out, allowing an in-depth understating of the phenomenon that initially was set out to investigate.

Results and Discussion

Rediscovering the Teaching Profession

Through the first semester of this master's program in Physical Education, final reflections showed changes on student's initial conceptions about the teaching profession. While assuming the dual role of students and teachers, it was reported the necessity of thinking and acting from the teacher's perspective, allowing their thoughts on teaching-learning process to transcend their student experiences and misconceptions.

The first steps taken during the first four months of this Physical Education Teaching Program were assumed as fundamental in altering students' understandings about the demands of what being a teacher is all about, simply because it became evident a limited and generalized conception. The highlighted aspects were: a) the complexity of the teaching

profession; b) the importance of theory-practice link; c) learning as process (“continuum”); d) reflective teaching at the basis of Physical Education curricular programs.

The Complexity of the Teaching Profession

Based on the reflection that was stimulated during the first semester, students were able to understand the complex nature of the teaching profession and developed an awareness that teaching was much more than transmit content and behavior control.

“Being a good teacher is not just about these perceptions, so throughout the semester I was able to learn and be conscious that the profession is much more complex than what I was particularly willing to find.”

“Through reflection, I was able to understand that when it comes to characterize the aspects of a good teacher, it is impossible to list all due to the complexity of the profession.”

This extracts indicate that, over time, students understandings about the teaching profession follow Perrenoud (2001) perspective, which claims the teaching is complex, requiring educators to have the ability to adapt and systematically seek new solutions. Although students emphasize changes of various understandings and conceptions, increased autonomy in teaching and conducting the teaching-learning process was also highlighted. Therefore, future teachers began to build their professional identity.

It is important to highlight that, due to the complexity of the teaching profession, final reflections stated that "they still haven't learned to be teachers" and emphasized the need for continuous professional development in teacher training. Consequently, this thoughts resonate with the definition of teaching profession proposed by Altet (2001) which describes it as a relational practice, influenced by multiple interactions and constrained by unique, complex and unpredictable situations.

The Importance of Theory-Practice Link

The relationship between university-taught theory and its application in practice context is still seen as a problematic aspect when considering the preparation of physical education teachers (Standal et al., 2014). As previously mentioned, traditional approaches restricted teaching by sending students into schools to apply the theoretical content. Despite research has acknowledged the limitations and difficulties of this theory-practice approach (Standal et al., 2014), the final reflections of FADEUP students revealed how important reflection was to change their understanding and thoughts about this specific topic.

“Exactly what we are doing right now, we are learning how to be professors by trying to increase our theoretical knowledge, but also associating it later with practice.”

“When I was asked what it means to be a teacher at the beginning of the school year, my response was: to transmit the theoretical content to the students. However, being a teacher is much more than that. It is not easy to be a teacher because it is an extremely complex profession. It is essential that we have several fundamental ingredients, such as the connection between theory and practice, professional culture and professional commitment.”

“... I understand that I will have many moments of learning ahead, and only practical experience will provide me with solutions to resolve them. I will have the theoretical knowledge to make informed choices and the ability to argue the 'why' behind my decisions, but each situation will be a new challenge.”

Although theory provides the knowledge necessary for understanding the essential principals of Physical Education, when applied in practical settings, teachers tend to develop a much more comprehensive understanding of how-to facilitate students learning. Despite content knowledge is critical, future teachers must consider their pedagogical methods and their personal choice of what and how to teach will be dependent and directly connected on theoretical knowledge from a different number of fields (Grimen, 2008).

In order to avoid the disconnection between what is learned in university and what is needed in real-world teaching scenarios, linking theory and practice enables future teachers to apply concepts in a meaningful way, reinsuring that a strong connection is being built.

The students of this mater's program tend to prioritize the future of Physical Education on a set of knowledge through which practical actions are grounded, but also a robust involvement between theory and practice which is essential for cultivating professionals who are not only knowledgeable but also effective in fostering meaningful Physical Education classes.

In their perspective, these concepts (theory and practice) act in a complementary way, providing the best tulles to justify their professional attitude and decisions based on scientific knowledge and not just through experience. As Winterstein (1995) states: theory without practice is empty, and practice without theory is blind.

Learning as a Process

Through the analysis of the final reflections of FADEUP students, the results demonstrated that at the beginning of this master's program, the future Physical Education teacher's conception of what it meant to be a teacher was limited to initial training. Once the professional internship year was completed, they expected and believed to be fully prepared for all the challenges, demands and difficulties that may arise from diverse practice scenarios.

However, due to reflection processes, at the end of the first semester this conception was totally altered, as the importance of continuous training was taken into consideration and repeatedly emphasized as essential for the teacher's professional development.

“It is curious to increasingly realize that initial training is, just as the name suggests, initial. And despite having completed the internship, my knowledge will never be complete and will change throughout my career.”

“If during my training as a student I created the idea that being a teacher would be a monotonous profession over the years, in this first semester I began to understand that this is not true; being a teacher is a work that is constantly updated and never finished.”

“In summary, I have not yet learned to be a teacher. It is in practice that we learn to be professionals, as our training is continuous, and this is just a small chapter in our careers.”

From this point of view, the importance of continuous education was highlighted, allowing future teachers to be in the center of their own careers, by transforming their conceptions, fostering self-awareness, improving self-image and becoming open to change and professional development (Lima et al., 2015). Therefore, students reinforce that teaching should be perceived as a career centered on lifelong learning and professional development.

The field of Education, including Physical Education, is constantly evolving. New teaching methodologies, advancements, social changes demand teachers constant update, designing more engaging and relevant Physical Education programs. This is why future Physical Education teachers have reported the need for educators to engaged in ongoing training.

Therefore, it is recognized that continuous education can have a positive impact on the improvement of pedagogical practices and, consequently, enhance the quality of Physical Education teaching (Junior & Tassoni, 2013). From this perspective, education training assumes a position of "incomplete," as the process is multifaceted, plural, has a beginning but never an end, is inconclusive, and self-formative (d'Ávila & Veiga, 2014). As so, future teachers "learn gradually" and emphasize the importance of renewing specific knowledge and skills.

There is no doubt that continuous professional development in Physical Education is fundamental to raise the quality of education that students receive. By actively engage in continuous learning, future Physical Education teachers reinforce the possibility to enhance their skills, adapt to changes in the educational landscape, and ultimately provide a more enriching and impactful experience for their students. As the field of education continues to evolve, the commitment to lifelong learning and professional growth will be predominant in cultivating future generations of active and critic individuals.

Reflective Teaching in Physical Education Curricular Programs

In the landscape of education, the emphasis on practical skills and theoretical knowledge has never been more crucial. In the field of Physical Education, the development of effective teaching methodologies that enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall well-being is fundamental. While varying pedagogical techniques is an essential component, reflective practice has emerged as a vital process that educators can harness to cultivate a dynamic, responsive, and ultimately successful Physical Education.

The movement of reflective practices has been a theme currently portrayed and is essential when it comes to addressing teacher professional development (Martínez & Collado, 2019). Despite the complexity linked to reflective practices, teachers must be able to reflect on their own processes, methods, and teaching content with the aim of planning and promoting effective and relevant lessons. Reflective practices are also an integral part of the process of evaluating one's own teaching performance and preparation, student outcomes, as well as the ability to promote social interaction and self-realization in students (Thorsen & DeVore, 2013).

Understanding reflective practice as a strengthening element of the profession and as an element of professional development, it is intended that teachers take an active voice in education and in continuous training linked to practice. Reflective practice is, therefore, a form of knowledge (Schön, 1988) that not only allows teachers evolution but also of the teaching profession.

Throughout teaching professionalism classes, future Physical Education teachers were presented with questions that stimulated critical thinking about their own practice and the teaching-learning process. The initial questions, somewhat unsettling and disconcerting in their eyes, allowed them to reinterpret the role of reflection over time, recognizing its value in the teaching profession.

"In this way, I also understood that the reflective capacity is not just a characteristic of a good teacher, but a necessary condition for the full exercise of the profession."

"In this profession, there is no place for closed minds, nor for narrow fields of vision..."

"There are no correct or incorrect ways of teaching. There are, rather, strategies appropriate to each context, regardless of its type. The teacher must be an autonomous critic."

However, at the very beginning of this master's program future physical education teachers revealed to have different conception that, as seen above, changed throughout the semester.

"I had a misconception in which I believed I knew everything about this profession, and I would not give due interest to the opinions of people already in the field of education..."

"The impact that reflective habits have on a teacher's ability to constantly improve and refine their practice was a concept that was not in my ideology of 'being a teacher.'"

"Finally, another process that I consider relevant and fundamental for evolving as a professional is the process of reflection, which initially was not even something I questioned, and which has since made complete sense."

FADEUP future teachers assume that reflective practice is not merely an additional component of Physical Education programs; it is a foundational process that contributes to the overall effectiveness of teaching and learning. By embracing a culture of reflection, educators can continually adapt their practices to meet the diverse needs of their students, promote lifelong healthy habits, and empower future generations through critical thinking. As the field of Physical Education continues to evolve, the integration of reflective practice will be crucial in shaping dynamic, responsive, and inclusive educational environments that foster both student success and educator growth.

Through commitment to reflective practices, Physical Education can transcend its traditional boundaries, becoming a comprehensive and transformative aspect of holistic education.

Conclusion and Implications

The engagement with critical thinking and reflection throughout the semester led students to think, feel and act differently through teaching processes, but also to understand the need to be career-long learners. As so, future teachers mentioned they are still discovering the new world of the teaching profession. There are multiple challenges, which is why it was reported the need to keep up-to-date and in constant renewal of knowledge. In this way, it is

recognized that continuous training can have a positive impact on improving pedagogical practices and thereby adding quality to Physical Education teaching (Junior & Tassoni, 2013).

At the beginning of initial teacher education, future Physical Education teachers are not aware of the demands and complexity of the profession. This point of view follows Perrenoud (2001) perspective, who attests that teaching professionalism is complex, so the teaching professionals need to develop the ability to adapt to the complexity of each situation and systematically seek new solutions through reflection.

Moreover, the need to integrate praxis is highlighted (reflected and theorized practice), facing theory and practice as complementary concepts. Therefore, it is crucial that the future Physical Education teacher know how to justify professional attitudes and decisions based on scientific knowledge and not only through experience.

Future teachers were able to reflect on an ethical dimension, going beyond the initial conception they had that favored traditional teaching, strongly marked by transmission and execution. As so, reflexive practice is recognized as a path to achieve knowledge, but also as a path to refocus the attention to students' voices, thoughts and needs, instead of possessing and applying fragmented techniques capable of assisting in instruction and controlling behavior (Larrivee, 2000).

In order to make a difference in Physical Education, reflection in initial teacher education triggers conscious, systematic, deliberate decision-making which allows teachers to review their own practices in a cyclical way, aiming to achieve high quality standards in Physical Education teaching.

For this reason, the curriculum of initial teacher education must be a context concerned with the development of professionals with creative thinking, who recognize the practical and social meaning of the profession, that place the student at the center of learning. In this sense, this work reinforces the need of reflection, which has a positive and beneficial impact on raising awareness of what being a physical education teacher demands and consequently on learning new content. In the process of becoming teachers, the need for initial training to value continuous critical reflection, both individual and collaborative, is highlighted, so that it is incorporated as an integral part of daily professional practice.

However, as every study, we have to address some limitations. The education and past experiences of each student was not analyzed, which could affect the nature and depth of reflections. Also, the final reflections were part of the final evaluation, which can lead to biased responses, as students could write what they thought to be the correct answer, or what the teacher was expecting to read.

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