



Professional development through reflection in teacher education



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The students' practical theories developed throughout the education programme.
- The students' reflections gradually broadened and deepened.
- Reflections remained mainly descriptive at the end of the programme.
- Reflection, feedback and specificities in each practicum promoted the development.
- The study showed the student teachers' lack of critical reflection skills.

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates primary school student teachers' practicum-related reflections. The data consists of the portfolio writings of 13 students. A thematic analysis approach was used to investigate the content and level of students' reflection and how it contributed to their practical theory and professional development. The results show that practical theories were developed throughout the education programme. Students' reflections gradually broadened and deepened but remained primarily descriptive. Reflection, feedback and specific issues concerning each practicum promoted the development of practical theories. These results suggest that supporting student teachers' reflective skills can impact positively on their professional development.

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1. Introduction

The process of professional development to become a teacher begins before teachers enter the teacher education programme as they start their education equipped with years of experience as pupils in school. These experiences and related memories form the basis of professional development during teacher education. Previous studies have indicated that former teachers influence student teachers' concepts of the teaching profession and form the starting point of their perceptions of teaching and what it means to be an ideal teacher (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Hudson, Usak, Fancovicová, Erdogan, & Prokop, 2010). Together with studies in teacher education, these beliefs, which are based on previous life experiences, constitute an important aspect of student teachers' practical theories (Levin & He, 2008). These theories form the

professional framework that guides a teacher's work; teachers use it when planning, acting and reflecting on teaching and other daily professional activities (Cornett, 1992; Levin & He, 2008).

In addition to previous life experiences, practicum sessions during initial teacher education play an essential role as a source of practical theories for student teachers (Levin & He, 2008; McKenzie & Santiago, 2005). Practicum sessions provide situational and authentic learning possibilities and promote the application of conceptual tools to real-world situations (Kim & Hannafin, 2008; Turunen & Tuovila, 2012). By reflecting on their experiences, students gradually apply theoretical concepts to their practice (Turunen & Tuovila, 2012).

Practical theories form the core of a teacher's identity, which answers to the question of who am I as a teacher (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). According to Beijaard et al. (2004), teacher identity is not a single identity; it consists of sub-identities that harmonise with one another. These sub-identities include the actual identity that reflects who the teacher is, the ideal identity that refers to the hopes and goals of the teacher and the norm

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identity that states what kind of teacher one should be.

Previous studies have explored the content and development of student teachers' teacher identities (see e.g. [Alsup, 2006](#); [Chong & Low, 2009](#); [Lamote & Engels, 2010](#)) as well as teacher identity formation in the context of practicum experiences (see e.g. [Ovens & Tinning, 2009](#); [Pence & Macgillivray, 2008](#); [Timperley, 2001](#); [Turnbull, 2005](#)). However, most previous studies typify a short timeframe and concentrate only on one practicum session at a time ([Pence & Macgillivray, 2008](#); [Turnbull, 2005](#)). Exceptions include [Lamote and Engels \(2010\)](#), who studied teacher identity formation in relation to first-year, second-year and third-year students, and [Chong and Low \(2009\)](#) who investigated the formation of teacher identities from pre-service to the end of the initial year of teaching. However, these studies do not focus on the role of practicum periods in the development of student teachers' practical theories.

Providing a contribution to the existing literature, this study presents a model of teacher education in one primary school teacher education programme in Finland and explores the development of student teachers' practical theories through changes in their reflection during the entire teacher education programme. The long timeframe, from four to five years, will shed light on the role of different practicum periods in practical theory building and will demonstrate how students' perceptions and reflections evolve over time from one practicum session to another. The following research question and two sub-questions will be explored:

How do student teachers develop their practical theories from one practicum to another during the teacher education programme?

- a) How does student teachers' reflection change after each practicum session?
- b) What characteristics in practicum sessions promote the development of student teachers' practical theories?

2. Practical theories as a core component of teacher identity

It has been acknowledged that teacher identity plays a significant role in teachers' professional development ([Roggers & Scott, 2008](#)). Teachers' personalities and experiences are seen as essential sources of their work, and it has been argued that identity strongly affects a teacher's satisfaction, commitment, motivation and self-efficacy ([Alsup, 2006](#); [Chong & Low, 2009](#); [Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006](#)).

Teacher identity formation can be approached from various perspectives: e.g. the psychosocial perspective (the focus is on the individual's inner world); the intersubjective perspective (individual and social aspects are equally important); a storied resource perspective (identity forms in social and cultural contexts) and the dialogical perspective (identity develops within discourses and ongoing dialogues that are bound to social, political and cultural contexts) ([Smith & Sparkes, 2008](#)). This article approaches teacher identity from a dialogical perspective. According to this view, identity formation is a process that is influenced by dialogues within different contexts and relationships; it is not a stable but rather a changing formation ([Beijaard et al., 2004](#)). In this study, the dialogue occurs in practicum sessions within which student teachers construct their professional identities both individually in their reflection and socially with their peer students and supervisors. Thus, their identities are shaped and reshaped with new experiences and relationships.

The core of teachers' identities are their practical theories. In the literature, there is a considerable variety of terms related to practical theory. For instance, it has been used interchangeably with practical knowledge ([Buitink, 2009](#)) and pedagogical beliefs ([Levin](#)

& [He, 2008](#)). According to [Levin and He \(2008\)](#), teachers' practical theories consist of interconnected, personal and context-based knowledge, beliefs and practice. These beliefs, which include moral, social and many other beliefs, strongly affect teachers' teaching practice and professional decision-making ([Chant, 2002](#); [Levin & He, 2008](#)).

Previous studies ([Cornett, 1992](#); [Levin & He, 2008](#)) show that student teachers' practical theories emanate from their family background and experiences as students as well as from their theoretical and practical teacher education studies. Student teachers acquire knowledge about teachers' work, qualities and teacher-student relationships from spending years in school and observing their teachers ([Hudson et al., 2010](#)). Previous studies also indicate that school-related recollections help students' learning processes and that memories link new knowledge to prior experiences ([Hudson et al., 2010](#); [Rothenberg, 1994](#)). Former teachers can be role models and can even serve as an inspiration to apply to teacher education ([Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014](#); [Uitto, 2011](#)). Moreover, educational studies and practicum sessions during pre-service teacher education form an important basis for practical theories ([Levin & He, 2008](#)). Theoretical studies shape professional knowledge ([Buitink, 2009](#)), which is applied by student teachers in pedagogical decision-making during practicum sessions. Theoretical knowledge is evaluated by students in the context of practical experiences. In this manner, theory and practice are in reciprocal interaction with each other. The development of practical theories is an on-going process, continually changing with new experiences and interpretations ([Stenberg, 2011](#)).

This interconnection between theoretical studies and real-life experiences connect practical theories to teacher identity ([Levin & He, 2008](#); [Fairbanks et al., 2010](#)). Student teachers observe, select and interpret new information through their developing beliefs of teaching, which are connected to their emerging view of themselves as teachers, hence their teacher identities ([Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008](#)). In this study, practical theories are understood as entities composed of student teachers' personal perceptions and values about the teaching profession, ideas of oneself as a teacher and one's strengths and weaknesses ([Stenberg, 2011](#)).

3. Reflection in student teachers' professional development

Student teachers' practical theories are developed through their practicum-related reflection. Indeed, reflection has been considered essential to a teacher's thinking as well as a goal for teacher education programmes ([Abou, 2007](#); [Schön, 1983](#); [Zeichner & Liston, 1996](#)). Through reflection, student teachers observe and evaluate their experiences and thoughts and conceptualise them in order to increase awareness of their feelings, beliefs and assumptions and to discern an analytic viewpoint of their experiences ([Kolb, 1984](#)). Thus, reflection can be understood as a key element of a student teacher's professional development ([Zeichner & Liston, 1987](#)). Previous studies note that practicum sessions enhance the development of student teachers' reflective skills ([Pence & Macgillivray, 2008](#); [Turnbull, 2005](#)). Tutoring discussions with peer students and supervisors – whereby student teachers analyse their own actions and receive feedback – promote dialogue and enable opportunities for individual and social reflection that may occur both spontaneously and in facilitated situations ([Orland-Barak & Klein, 2005](#); [van Woerkom & Croon, 2008](#)).

[Kolb \(1984\)](#) has developed a four stage model of reflection based on, among others, [Dewey's \(1933\)](#) model: (1) reflective observation, (2) abstract conceptualisation, (3) active experimentation and (4) concrete experience. [Mezirow \(1981\)](#) emphasises a critical aspect of reflection that is more typical to more experienced individuals than to novices. Critical reflection requires a critical standpoint on

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