

# Audio Diaries: Developing Pre-Service Teachers' Reflective Practices

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## Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on pre-service teachers and was conducted to provide them with an opportunity to engage in reflective practice. By creating audio diaries during the six-month practicum period, participants recorded guided reflections throughout their teaching practice. This resulted in 16 hours of audio recordings which subsequently underwent content analysis. Results reveal that the pre-service teachers who engaged in critical reflection using mobile technologies, discussed issues of time management, the emotional dimensions of the practicum, as well as supervision. The research questions are the following: What kind of support does the audio diary provide to pre-service teachers? How beneficial is this strategy in their professional development? What are the constructs or themes that constitute and/or characterize their concepts of teaching? The research was carried out in three phases: firstly, an interview preceding the practicum; secondly, the 6-month teaching practicum during which the pre-service teachers recorded their reflections on their teaching. These audio diary entries were facilitated by 3-4 guiding questions provided by the researcher. The post-practicum interview constitutes the third phase. Teachers perceived audio diaries as useful tools in providing an opportunity for critical reflection on their teaching practicum. Recording reflections also created new approaches and strategies to their teaching practice, such as ongoing and sustained reflective practice, reflection-in-action, reflection on future engagements, suggestions for guiding questions. As confirmed by the interviews, audio diaries and mobile technologies opened up new perspectives to supporting teachers' professional development and self-inquiry; hence, further research of the topic is needed.

**Keywords:** reflection; teacher training; audio diaries; person-centred approach; professional self-awareness

## 1. Introduction

This study applies the qualitative audio diary approach, a method that has been widely used in social sciences to collect qualitative accounts but is less frequently implemented in teacher training. Audio diaries are considered useful in encouraging sense-making and initiating processes of change. The aim of this study is to explore how participant-related reflective practices are supported by the use of this method.

## 2. Theoretical foundations and scientific significance

The importance of reflection has become an important principle of personality development in person-centred psychology and the work of Carl Rogers (1951), among others. Rogers interpreted the concept as an approach, the basic principles of person-centredness being empathy, unconditional acceptance, and congruence. Person-centredness is a way of existence whereby people living together turn towards each other's person. In this, every person is equally important, every individual and everyone's personality must be respected, and everyone must be given the opportunity to develop and receive attention. Rogers, through his experience of leading person-centred group work, has provided a wealth of theoretical and practical insights into the legitimacy of this approach in areas where the personality of the professional is also a fundamental work tool. Importantly, in the person-centred approach, the key factor in positive changes in personality is primarily the individual and not external conditions and influences (Rogers, 2013).

The person-centred approach originated in psychotherapy, but quickly spread to the social and educational context, where using group methods was also implemented, and where the person-centred approach was proven to be a powerful tool for building resilience in individuals and organisations. In later years, it also formed the theoretical basis for development methods such as video training in schools, the Bálint group, Gordon training and the audio diary (Brophy, 2004; Elder, 2007; Gordon, 2003; Káplár, Dorner, 2020).

The importance of a person-centred approach in teacher training is supported by research on teaching beliefs that was published in the early 1990s (Kagan, 1992; Zhihui, 1996); this showed that teachers' preconceived beliefs influence their professional effectiveness. Exploring teaching beliefs is therefore important, right from the start of training.

The importance of reflection in teachers' professional development, as claimed by Schön (1983), has been thoroughly researched. Hatton and Smith (1995) identified varying forms of reflection, including critical reflection and how it can be used in teacher education by also providing further perspectives to reflection on action and in action, as well as technical

rationality. The need for ongoing reflection has been also confirmed by research that deals with teachers' change of beliefs, namely, that reflection-oriented learning provides an appropriate context for promoting attitude change (Tillema, 2000). Similarly, Francis (1995) argues that reflective practices in teacher education supports pre-service teachers in observing and understanding the process of personal theory building. Leroux and Théorêt (2014) found evidence of relationships between teacher resilience and reflection, which creates new perspectives to teachers' professional development. Káplár-Kodácsy and Dorner (2020) found the use of the audio diary useful in the reflective practice of mentors.

The person-centred approach, together with professional self-awareness, is an important approach to incorporate into teacher training practice, where the audio diary or other similar methods can be used to develop reflective skills (Rogers, Lyon, Tausch, 2013; Schussler, Stooksberry, Bercaw, 2010) (see Figure 1).

*Figure1: The person-centred model of teacher training<sup>1</sup>*



### 3. Research questions and methods

The research involved pre-service teachers in Romania (n=10) who had encountered the audio diary during their Master's studies (MA). The gender breakdown is one man and nine women. Participation was voluntary. They formulated their reflections along semi-structured interview questions over a period of six months, which had the aim to provide them with a tool to develop their professional self-reflection. The research was structured around the following questions:

1. What kind of support does the audio diary provide to pre-service teachers?

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<sup>1</sup> provided by the author

2. How beneficial is this strategy for their professional development?
3. What are those constructs or themes that constitute and/or characterize their concepts of teaching?

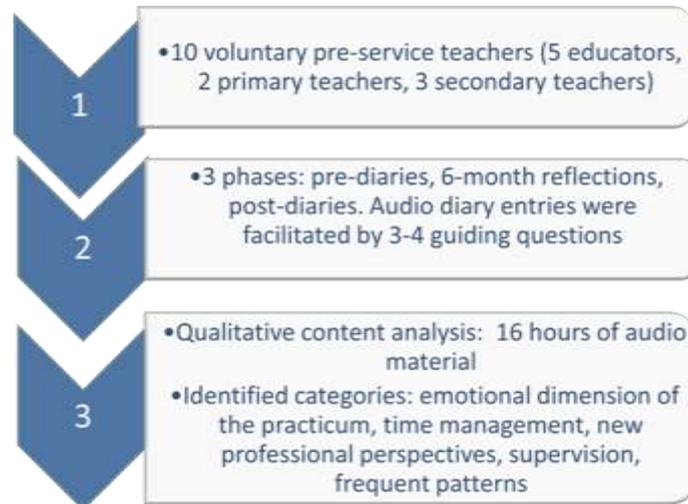
This qualitative study involved pre-service teachers and was conducted to provide them with an opportunity to engage in reflective practice. By creating audio diaries during the six-month practicum period, participants recorded guided reflections (trigger questions sent by the researchers) on their teaching practice on a regular basis. This resulted in 16 hours of audio recordings which then were analysed. Results reveal that the pre-service teachers who engaged in critical reflection used mobile technologies and they discussed issues of time management, the emotional dimensions of doing the practicum, as well as supervision.

Ten pre-service teachers recorded their reflections by using mobile technologies and created audio diaries during the 6-month-period of their practicum. Researchers provided them with guiding questions through which participants could structure their thinking with the aim to develop a critical approach towards their own practice. Participation was voluntary.

The choice of the audio diary has several advantages over a traditional written or video-recorded version of the reflection, as it allows a high degree of freedom and minimises the influence of the researchers on the participants (Crozier and Cassell, 2015).

The research had three phases (Figure 2.): firstly, an interview preceding the practicum, then the 6-month teaching practicum during which pre-service teachers recorded their reflections on their teaching. These audio diary entries were facilitated by 3-4 guiding questions provided by the researcher. The post-practicum interview constitutes the third phase. The semi-structured pre- and post-practicum interviews were also necessary to improve the reliability of the data obtained during the six-month reflection period (Pini, 2001; Jones, 2015; Káplár, Dorner, 2020). The six-month long reflection was supported by 4-5 questions sent in advance each month by the researcher. The questions focused on the most important elements of the teaching process (self-evaluation of the teaching practice; structure of the teaching practice; from whom and from what they received help; unexpected events; ethical dilemmas), but were flexible and informal enough to allow space for reflection.

*Figure 2: Research methodology*



Participants recorded the reflections on their own devices and then emailed them to the researcher. The recorded data adds up to 16 hours of audio material which was qualitatively analysed. The analysis aimed for categories to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

#### **4. Results and discussion**

Thematic analysis was used to process the audio material (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis identified three thematic elements of a significant frequency (see Table 1). The results show that the audio diary method elicited strong emotional responses from the participants, with a large majority of the recordings being dominated by expressions of emotion. We believe that this highlights the unfortunate fact that, from a professional point of view, teachers do not have the opportunity for supervision. Nevertheless, this is very much needed, especially at such an early stage in their careers, as the results show that they have largely used the audio diary as a venting tool. The second most common element is time and classroom management, which is very understandable as this is usually the biggest challenge for teachers at the beginning of their careers. It was interesting to see that new professional perspectives are also present to a large extent, which shows the professional commitment of the participants.

*Table 1: Results along the frequency of the identified categories*

Categories	Pre-diaries	Six-month reflection	Post-diaries	SUM
<b>f</b>				
Emotions	72	266	122	460
Time/classroom management	45	87	39	171
New professional perspectives	33	72	28	133
<b>FREQUENT PATTERNS during the whole reflection period</b>				
Description of conflicts	23	67	26	116
Working with special needs children	19	45	11	75
Adapting to changes	11	28	7	46

We were also curious about the most common patterns that occur among participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This can be important because, in the case of personality development, the patterns that have been established can serve as a starting point for further development. These recurring elements may also indicate that participants find them difficult to cope with because they lack experience and knowledge in the field. The results show that the most common patterns were conflicts, working with children with special needs, and adapting to change. These are areas that appear very scarcely in the teacher training curriculum, so the recurrence of these elements can be understood as due to the unpreparedness of the participants.

All of the participants were positive and persistent throughout the six-month process of recording audio diaries. In the final interview, they enthusiastically reported how much they enjoyed listening to the recordings, and that the audio diary had helped them to improve their reflective skills and to know themselves better from a professional point of view. Seven of them reported a more conscious approach to their teaching activity as a result of the audio diary, a more definite formulation of their goals; they also developed reflection during their teaching activity, which usually takes several years of practice (Shön, 1983). Eight out of ten participants indicated that they would definitely use the method again in the future.

Lack of time has been reported as one of the disadvantages of using this method (Káplár-Kodácsy and Dorner, 2020, 269–270), but this was not mentioned by the participants in the present research.

## 5. Conclusion

Pre-service teachers perceived audio diaries to be useful in providing opportunities for critical reflection on their teaching practicum. Recording reflections also created new approaches and strategies to professional practice, such as ongoing and sustained reflective practice, reflection-in-action, reflection on future engagements, suggestions for guiding questions. The following categories have emerged from the analysis: the emotional dimension of the practicum, time management, new professional perspectives. As confirmed by the interviews, audio diaries and mobile technologies opened new perspectives to supporting teachers' professional development and self-inquiry; hence, further research of the topic is needed. We believe that the introduction of the audio diary into the practice of teacher training and formation can contribute to positive results in terms of teachers' professional self-awareness and, at the same time, can make a major contribution to teachers' well-being.

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