

SELF-REFLECTIVE TOOL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS AS A WAY TO A COMPETENT TEACHER

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Model of the teacher as a reflective practitioner has come to the fore in recent years. The students are considered a key actor in their own professional development. The aim is to present a tool for students' reflection and self-reflection. The tool was created to individualize the training of future teachers. The tool was implemented within all pedagogical practices of students of early childhood education and verified through students' reflective reports (N=91) at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. The tool helps students think about their professional development, plan sub-steps and set specific goals they want to achieve in the development of their professional competences. Students also chose different goals for their development, which corresponded to their different initial knowledge and experience.

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ORODJE ZA SAMOREFLEKSIJO ZA VZGOJITELJE PREDŠOLSKE VZGOJE KOT POT DO KOMPETENTNEGA VZGOJITELJA

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V zadnjih letih je v ospredju model učitelja kot reflektivnega praktika. Učenci veljajo za ključne akterje lastnega profesionalnega razvoja. Namen prispevka je predstaviti orodje za refleksijo in samorefleksijo učencev. Orodje je bilo ustvarjeno z namenom individualizacije usposabljanja bodočih učiteljev. Orodje je bilo implementirano v vse pedagoške prakse študentov predšolske vzgoje in preverjeno z refleksivnimi poročili študentov (N=91) na Zahodnočeški univerzi v Plznu. Orodje pomaga študentom razmišljati o svojem poklicnem razvoju, načrtovati podetape in določiti konkretne cilje, ki jih želijo doseči pri razvoju svojih poklicnih kompetenc. Študenti so si izbrali tudi različne cilje svojega razvoja, ki so ustrezali njihovem različnemu začetnemu znanju in izkušnjam.



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1 Introduction

The work of a preschool teacher is beautiful, but also extremely demanding (Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014). An adult takes on a great responsibility and enters a child's life with the intention of significantly influencing him. The specifics of a teacher's work in preschool education result both from the developmental characteristics of the preschool period and from the diversity of children and families who come to kindergartens (Keenan et al., 2016). Kindergarten is often the first place where a child steps out of the family environment and gains further experience. He enters new social roles and must overcome many difficulties. Teachers must be prepared for their work so well that they can perceive the individual needs of each child, support them and create an environment in which the child will be well, and his potential can be developed. This is not an easy task for educators of future teachers, and therefore it is necessary to find ways to provide students and their accompanying teachers with support in their professional development (Ribaeus & Hultman, 2022). Therefore, we aimed for verifying reflective tool's functionality enabling students to personalize future teachers' training and assessing how it aids their professional growth.

2 Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

2.1 Professional Competence and Professional Development

Defining the term competence involves several aspects such as knowledge, skills, experiences, attitudes, values, personality characteristics or dispositions. Despite the formulation differences of the individual authors, there is the same line of understanding of the terms including the professional competence of the teacher. We can understand professional competence as the comprehensive qualities of a teacher needed to realize the profession (Peklaj, 2015; Vašutová, 2004). "Competences are a construct that characterizes the effective behavior of a teacher in individual layers of his activity and in individual pedagogical roles" (Vašutová, 2004, p. 92).

The development of professional competences of teachers or student teachers is a complex process influenced by various factors. Beauchamp (2015) emphasize the importance of reflection, self-evaluation and evaluation tools in this process. Both

Anspal et al. (2012) and Timoštsjuk & Ugaste (2010) point to the importance of the practice period and social aspects of learning in the formation of teacher identity. Koster et al. (2008) draw attention to the importance of applying a professional standard and standard-based self-assessment and professional development procedures. These studies suggest that student teachers also have an active role in their own professional development, which is shaped by their experiences, interactions and learning processes. The student is considered a key actor in his own professional development (Collin et al., 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Korthagen, 2011; Walkington, 2005; Walsh & Mann, 2015; Zeichner, 2004). It is the students who gradually develop their reflective skills, thanks to which they can constantly work on their professional development, learn new things and adapt to changing conditions even after completing their studies.

2.2 The Importance of Self-reflection in the Teaching Profession

In recent decades, the model of the teacher as a reflective practitioner has come to the fore when considering the concept of teacher preparation (Collin et al., 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Korthagen, 2011; Walkington, 2005; Zeichner, 1994). In practice, this means that emphasis is placed on the ability to "see" and understand one's own actions or behavior in a situational context. For this, the teacher uses reflection and self-reflection. To reflect means to mirror. Reflection is "awareness of one's situation and position in confrontation with how others see us; in other words, it is the ability to adequately and critically understand what is happening in our world and to us in it", while self-reflection is "a certain internal dialogue, it is actually the answers to the questions we ask ourselves in connection with our activities" (Pířšová & Černá, 2006, p. 14). We lean towards the concept of reflection according to Dewey (Korthagen, 2011), when practical experience relates to theoretical knowledge. In this process, there is a significant role of the accompanying teacher or educator, who helps the student to see and realize the key aspects of actions or behavior (Figure 1).

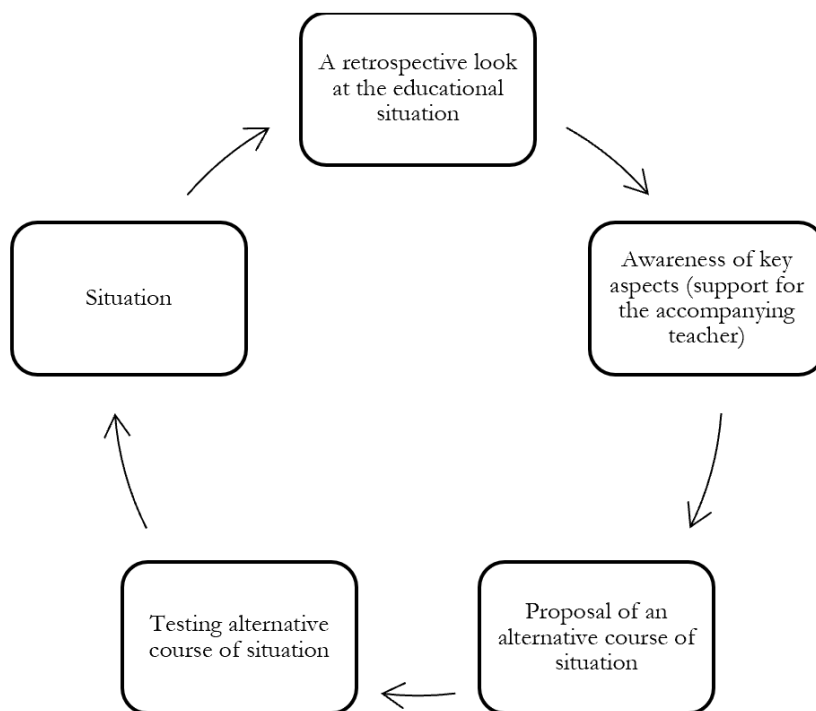


Figure 1: Model of reflection process.
Source: Korthagen, 2011, p. 58 modified

Research on the self-assessment of student teachers' professional competences reveals several key findings. Kalke et al. (2022) found that nursery school teaching students highly rate their competences in the area of ensuring professional activity, implementing the learning process and improving professional competences. Schneider & Bodensohn (2019) further emphasized the importance of assessment competences, with student teachers perceiving them as a distinct and important aspect of their professional development. However, Wheeler & Knoop (1982) pointed out that the self-evaluations of student teachers tend to be higher than the self-evaluations of their supervisors, which indicates a possible bias. It is therefore important to develop students' reflective skills. Pravdová (2015) points to possible or desirable interventions by educators of future teachers, which can be used to support the process within undergraduate training. Also, in other literature (Tomková et al., 2012; Tomková, 2014; Kratochvílová & Horká, 2016) we can come across tools to support or evaluate the professional development of future teachers.

The student is seen as a key actor in his own professional development (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). It is him who gradually develops his reflective skills, which enables him to continuously work on his professional development, learn new things and adapt to changing conditions even after graduation. Studies (Kratochvílová & Horká, 2016; Vaculík Pravdová et al.) confirm the need to guide students and their educators to understand the importance of reflection. Burkovičová (2012) sees reflection on one's own teaching experience as one of the means of developing professional competences of preschool teachers. Syslová & Hornáčková (2014) see reflection as continuous professional learning that begins in pre-service education. They consider the achievement of metacognition in reflection as one of the criteria of teacher quality.

2.3 Self-reflective Tool for Preschool Teachers

The tool for students' reflection and self-reflection was created due to the need to individualize the training of future teachers and provide each student, at any stage of professional development, with adequate support. We based our experience on the fact that the entry level of knowledge, skills, but also the expectations and ideas about the teaching profession differ greatly among individual students. Individualization and differentiation of their professional development during their studies is thus a very necessary approach. This approach is also needed in the context of the issue of academic failure (Kubíková et al., 2021). We can talk about the individualization of the student's professional development as one of the fundamental ways to overcome this failure. During the creation, we were based on the phases of the teacher's professional development (Svatoš, 2013), while we focused on the area of motivation, shaping the idea of the social-personal role of the teacher and the didactic and reflective role. We were also inspired by foreign experiences with the preparation of future teachers, which build on the successive gradation of the difficulty of pedagogical practices, strengthening the importance of the accompanying teacher and structured self-reflection (Kosová, 2016). It is the structure of self-reflection that is a characteristic feature of the designed tool for reflection and self-reflection, as the student progresses from simpler (easier to achieve) professional development goals to more demanding and complex goals.

The process of creating a tool for student reflection and self-reflection took place in several stages. First, there were discussions about students' needs and existing tools for teacher quality assessment. The key areas of development of professional competences of students - future teachers were defined in accordance with the requirements of individual pedagogical practices. Subsequently, the first form of the tool for reflection and self-reflection was designed. The creation was based on the profile of a graduate of the Teaching for Kindergarten study program and the goals and content of individual pedagogical practices. It was inspired by some current tools for evaluating the work of a teacher in preschool education. The first of them was the Competent Teacher for the 21st Century (Step by Step, o.p.s. ČR (2011)), supplemented by the Tool for Evaluating the Quality of the Work of Preschool Teachers (Škardová, 2015). The second is the Framework of Professional Qualities of Kindergarten Teachers (Syslová & Škarková, 2015). All these materials contain an overview of individual professional competences, which, however, we needed to define in more detail for the needs of gradation of competence development. Another inspiration was the material Cards for Formative Assessment of Student Teachers (Vaculík Pravdová et al.), which is interesting in terms of format and the way it can be worked with. The new tool therefore contains detailed professional competences, graded from the easiest to the most demanding, divided according to the individual areas of teachers' professional activities (see Table 1.). The experience of the authors is especially valuable, that it is more meaningful for students to have a tool in a form where they can use it according to their needs, which classic evaluation sheets do not allow. In the phase of the first draft, the principals of kindergartens, who cooperate with the Faculty of Education in providing pedagogical practices, were invited to discuss the form and content of the tool. At the end of the term, a seminar was held for the accompanying teachers, where they had the opportunity to try out the tool and learn how to use it to support students in their pedagogical practices. In autumn 2022, the first phase of verification took place. All students of the second and third year of the study program Teaching for Kindergarten participated in it, in both full-time and combined forms. These students started to work with the tool, with the support of pedagogical practice teachers and accompanying teachers. In the same way, simultaneous verification was carried out within the pedagogical practices of the same field at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the Charles University. At the end of the term, students reflected on their experiences in the final colloquia. Accompanying teachers shared their experiences through a questionnaire survey. Based on the results, the tool was

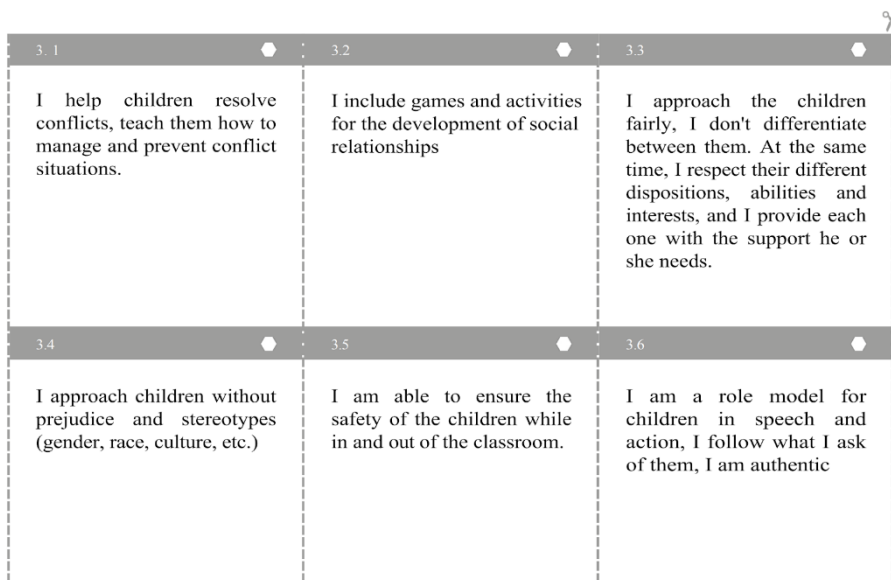
modified. In the spring of 2023, the second phase of verification followed, which proceeded in the same way as the previous phase. The exception was the new use of the tool in student portfolios submitted as part of the state final exam. The results led to further modification of the instrument (Table 1).

Table 1: Description of monitored areas of the self-reflective tool.

| Monitored area | Description |
|---|--|
| Me as a teacher - my professional development | Defining and clarifying the idea of yourself as a teacher. Searching for professional paths growth. |
| Communication with children | Interaction with children, applying a respectful and partnership approach. |
| Classroom management - taking care of the classroom climate | Class management and management of related tasks, including documentation. Development of support for prosocial relationships, creating an emotionally safe environment for every child. |
| Pedagogical diagnostics, assessment and the child's self-evaluation | Getting to know children and understanding their individual needs, developmental peculiarities and interests. Supporting the development of a child's self-concept. |
| Planning and implementation of education | Knowledge and application of appropriate educational methods and organizational forms with an emphasis on active participation of the child. |
| Planning and working with goals | Thoughtfulness in pedagogical design with an emphasis on the development of key competences and applying an integrative approach. |
| Planning and individualization | Applying an individualized approach to the planning and implementation of educational activities. |
| Communication with adult actors of education | Applying a partnership approach to colleagues and parents of children. |
| Preparing a supportive environment for child's learning | Setting material conditions to ensure children's well-being and optimize the learning process. |

2.4 How to Work with the Tool

The tool is in the form of cards (see Figure 2), while each card contains one professional goal, or an aspect of the teacher's professional competence. The cards are color-coded and divided into individual areas (Table 1).



| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 3.1 I help children resolve conflicts, teach them how to manage and prevent conflict situations. | 3.2 I include games and activities for the development of social relationships | 3.3 I approach the children fairly, I don't differentiate between them. At the same time, I respect their different dispositions, abilities and interests, and I provide each one with the support he or she needs. |
| 3.4 I approach children without prejudice and stereotypes (gender, race, culture, etc.) | 3.5 I am able to ensure the safety of the children while in and out of the classroom. | 3.6 I am a role model for children in speech and action, I follow what I ask of them, I am authentic |

Figure 2: An example of the gradation of the difficulty of competences in the selected area.
Source: Koželuhová et al. (2023)

When choosing career goals, a student should proceed by progressing from the basic level up in each area. He is always looking for evidence that he has already achieved the given goal. Evidence, in the form of e.g. a comment, a specific statement, a sample of pedagogical preparation, a photograph, etc., is added to the professional portfolio together with the given card. Thanks to this procedure, he can identify the level of his current development of professional competences related to the given area and plan what he will continue to work on in his professional development. This process takes place in a spiral manner, but the student is not expected to reach the maximum level in all the monitored areas during the course of study. The goal is to learn to reflect on the level of his professional development, to actively look for ways to grow and to connect practical experience with theoretical knowledge. The tool enables a shift within the individual capabilities of the student and the achievement of his maximum personal potential during his studies. It is assumed that the student will learn to work with the tool in such a way that he will be able to use it even after entering practice.

3 Research Aims

The goal of the research was to verify the functionality of the reflective tool for students to individualize the training of future teachers and to find out how the self-reflective tool helps students in their professional development.

3.1 Research Questions

Following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What is the reason for students to choose a concrete goal for their practice?

RQ2: What is the opinion of students about the self-reflective tool?

RQ3: What impact for their future study process has using of the self-reflective tool?

3.2 Participants

The research was conducted among all students of all years of full-time study of the study program Teaching for Kindergarten (N=91) in the academic year 2022/2023 and was implemented in the form of a multi-case study of the evaluation type (Yin, 2018), where a case was understood as one study year (Tab. 2). The research was carried out in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (2022). Part-time students who were already teaching in ECE facilities were excluded from the research, because their vast experience with teaching would alter the results.

Table 2: Description of participants

| | Year of study | Sum |
|-------|---------------|-----|
| A | 1 | 21 |
| B | 2 | 18 |
| C | 3 | 52 |
| Total | | 91 |

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from students' anonymous reflective reports (N=91) in June 2023, which they submitted together with their portfolio documenting their study progress. Data were analyzed using open coding, when individual student statements were divided into data segments that were assigned individual codes. These were subsequently grouped into clusters; into categories that were analysed by thematic coding in line with the research questions (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2018) (Table 3). Coding was done using Atlas.ti software.

Table 3: Analytical categories induced in qualitative analysis.

| Category | Description |
|--|--|
| Choice of professional goal | Approach to choosing the career goal the student wants to work on; motives, reasons |
| Benefit of the tool | Students' views on the benefits of the tool for improving their professional development |
| Impact of the tool on students' professional development | Evaluating the impact on students' professional development |

4 Results

4.1 What is the Reason for Students to Choose a Concrete Goal for Their Practice?

Students of all three groups give similar reasons when choosing their own educational goal, the achievement of which they want to focus immediately, which can be divided into two main categories:

The student's need - In terms of frequency of codes, this category was the most represented across all monitored years. This category includes statements expressing the reason for choosing a specific goal/card associated with the student's internal motivation. The statements were typically presented with the phrase "I want". In these cases, students perceived their needs, named them, and were able to plan steps that helped them achieve their goals. We have identified three levels of intrinsic motivation in this category of statements - *the need to learn something new, the need to overcome one's own deficiency and the need to satisfy curiosity*. The need to learn is represented, for example, by the statement: "When choosing cards, I choose the ones that will

take me further, I have things on them that I want to master." Another represented level related to the student's internal needs was the need to overcome one's own shortcomings associated with the perception of one's own weakness; it is represented, for example, by the statements "I chose such cards, because I felt these were areas I needed to work on."; or "I choose according to what I feel insecure about", "I focus on goals that I have a problem with". The above statements indicate that students who make their choice for reasons in the form of a desire to improve, understand the nature of a self-reflective tool and are able to reflect on their professional growth. One third-year student expressed it succinctly with the words: "I take mastering the card as my personal challenge", which means a purposeful approach to professional development. This may not be the case for students who, although they also chose their goals based on their need, it was a need to satisfy their curiosity. Statements such as "this card was chosen out of curiosity, I wanted to get to know something new", or "I found it interesting" do not directly imply awareness of the need to master a certain competence.

Experience from previous practice - The second identified category is related to both the student's internal and external motivation and occurred only in second and higher year students. The choice was the result of their previous experience in teaching practice. The students either responded to some perceived deficiency, e.g. "At the previous practice, I had the feeling that my activities did not make much sense, they were not connected in any way and it was a bit of chaos, that's why I chose this card.", or "I chose this card for a clear reason - I never thought about the risks in advance. I think it has a bit to do with my nature. I'm quite impulsive and sometimes act without thinking." Sometimes students listened to the recommendations of the practice mentor in their selection, who told them what to work on next ("I always choose cards according to the mentor's evaluation from the last practice."). In the second case, however, the question is whether they internally identified with the mentioned recommendation and therefore perceived the need to work on something, or whether they took it as an instruction, a task that they are only fulfilling.

The need of the situation - There were rare statements indicating that the selection of the card was made as a reaction to the current situation in the classroom, when the student was confronted with the need to handle a certain situation in practice. An example is the statement: "There were a large number of children in the class

who were in kindergarten for the first time, so I chose cards that were primarily focused on communicating with them."

The reasons for choosing a specific goal reflect an understanding of the meaning of the self-reflective tool and an awareness of one's own responsibility for one's professional development; it is also related to the answer to another research question.

4.2 What is the Opinion of Students about the Self-reflective Tool?

The tool for student self-reflection is mostly very positively received. A first-year student stated: "I see as very positive how we are led to constantly clarify our own relationship to individual aspects of the teacher's work, as well as to the profession itself". Both its content and formal processing are appreciated, which students enables easy orientation. There were opinions among the students that the tool is suitable "even for experienced teachers who would like to further develop and work on themselves". The stated advantages can be divided into three categories:

A tool as a mirror - The tool helps the student evaluate the level of his development so far, helps him in self-reflection and planning the next steps in education. This is expressed, for example, in the statement: "they help to discover one's strengths or, conversely, one's weaknesses". This category was the most represented in terms of frequency of codes.

A tool as a direction indicator - "While using the cards, one realizes what still needs to be worked on" or "they show me the areas that I need to be able to do as a teacher". Thanks to the tool, students know where to head in their professional growth, what they should master, they can form a concrete idea of the complexity of the teaching profession. Both mentioned categories confirm the functionality of the tool and its contribution to the preparation of future teachers.

However, there were also categories that indicate a lack of understanding of the purpose of the tool and therefore represent a stimulus for possible improvement of the use of the tool not only during practice, but also during teaching. These are the following categories:

A tool as an inspiration - In this case, the tool is used as a topic for possible activities with children, e.g., the inclusion of self-assessment activities, cooperative activities or the involvement of children in planning, which are perceived by the student as possible, but not necessary for the quality of his pedagogical work. This code indicates that the tool was not fully understood; the contained competences are not understood as binding.

A tool as a duty - In the reflections, sporadically, but nevertheless, statements appeared that lead us to believe that the purpose of the tool was not understood. It is perceived as another study obligation, as was expressed, for example, by the statement "It's another obligation that I have to fulfill at the practices". The impression of the obligation "I have to fulfill some card" results in the student focusing more on formal fulfillment during teaching practice, rather than on a comprehensive perception of his pedagogical activity and level of development. In this way, there is no self-reflection of one's pedagogical work or professional growth, reflection on strengths and weaknesses, opportunities for self-development. We perceive as important the fact that the statements fell into this category only among third-year students, who first encountered the tool almost at the end of their practice. In the lower grades, the statement referring to the perception of the instrument as another study obligation did not occur.

A tool as a source of concern - Some students made statements, although often associated with a generally positive evaluation of the tool, that show that the tool can lead to student discomfort. "Although they help me to focus on the given things, at the same time it makes me depressed, how much I still have to improve", summed up one student. Others cited as problematic the number of cards-goals from which students choose. Their high number makes orientation and selection difficult; it can evoke the idea of the unattainability of individual goals and thereby influence the aspirational level of students.

4.3 What Impact for Students' Future Study Process Has Using of the Self-reflective Tool?

The tool is evaluated by the students as beneficial; they stated the specific effects of its use on their professional development and mastery of pedagogical practice. The following main positives emerged from the respondents' answers:

Perception of own progress - The tool allows students to recognize and name the sub-achievements they are achieving. In practice, many monitored competences may not be clearly perceived by the student, the student may not be aware of any of his skills, or vice versa. The evaluation of one's own pedagogical output is often influenced by current emotions. However, the tool provides a clear evaluation criterion that helps students to view their work objectively: it expresses, for example, the statements: "thanks to it, I will make sure whether I managed to incorporate and develop my other teaching competences", or the given specific description of the change in status: "at first the competence was more difficult to describe, but by the end I could see it almost immediately".

Thinking about one's own professional development, planning next steps - Students report that thanks to the tool they think much more about themselves, about their idea of an ideal teacher, about what is needed in practice: "I realize how and what a good teacher must be able to do. What I have to work on."

Implementation of pedagogical practice with professional development goals - Pedagogical practices as a result of using the tool are much more targeted, the student systematically prepares for them. It is no longer only about "participation" in pedagogical practice, but about the deliberate implementation of concrete steps that are intended to advance the student. It was curiously summed up by a third-year student who stated that "finally, I have another goal in my practice than to survive".

Looking for evidence of self-improvement - Thanks to the tool, students don't just stick with their assumption that they already master a skill. They are looking for evidence. We found these in their reflections in the form of a specific description of fulfilling the goal of the selected card, for example: "In my preparations, I always wrote down what risks might occur, I thought about how to behave in situations". In one reflection there was even an appeal, so that students don't put the cards away with the feeling of "I've done it, I'm putting the card on the pile", but keep coming back to them in their practice.

5 Discussion, Conclusion and Limitations

The results of the survey showed that the tool for self-reflection is functional and necessary. The tool respects individual study needs and interests of the students, when it gives them a choice and leads them to responsibility, what they will currently focus on in their professional development. Thanks to this, students feel more responsible for their own professional development (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). They think about themselves, about their future profession as a teacher, perceive their strengths and the areas they want/need to work on. This is consistent with the idea of the teacher as a reflective practitioner who uses self-reflection in his daily work (Korthagen, 2011; Walkington, 2005; Zeichner, 1994; Jay & Johnson, 2002).

However, the results showed the necessity of quality student support. It is not possible to leave them to themselves with only a self-reflective tool, but it is necessary to guide them through the process of learning self-reflection, which is confirmed by findings (Pravdová, 2015; Wheeler & Knoop, 1982). Otherwise, there is a risk of formal use of the tool. It is necessary to actively teach the students and the mentors to systematically reflect their own work. Without their support, it is difficult for some students to use the tool independently, as they are not yet able to sufficiently reflect on their work and use the tool as a springboard for the next step. Instead, they perceive it as one of many duties, its meaning remains hidden from them, or they cannot apply it independently. On the other hand, if students are familiar with the tool from the beginning of their studies, it is easier for them to accept it and base their professional development on it. The demands placed on students by individual required competences through partial professional goals/cards can positively influence their aspirational level and thereby strengthen the chance that they will successfully complete their studies (Kubíková et al., 2021). This may be related to the fact that they experience satisfaction from what they have mastered, and their professional and personal self-confidence grows (Kalke et al., 2022).

The tool brings opportunity for students and their mentors to discuss and cooperate on students' professional development. The joint search for evidence of the application of the given competence can significantly strengthen the objectivity of the student's self-assessment. This is important for overcoming a different view of

the achieved level of students' professional competences (Schneider & Bodensohn, 2019).

Several students evaluated the tool through the lens of a teacher, not a student, and spoke of its importance to the wider educational community. "I think that every teacher should get cards. Both for the beginning and also during the years when he works as a teacher, so he can check that he doesn't forget anything." In the Czech Republic, compulsory competency frameworks for teachers are now being prepared, which follow on from the general competency framework for a teacher graduate (MŠMT, 2023). The created tool could become one of the starting points for formulating the competences of preschool teachers.

Limitations of the research are that the students might have been possibly directly influenced by the researchers. Another limitation is a number of students involved. For more complex view we would need more participants during more academic years. Final limitation is that the researchers are also authors of the tool, which could have created some bias.

For further research we suggest implementation of the tool on other universities and researching the outcomes. If the results of such researches would prove beneficial for the students and the overall system, implementation of the tool on national level would seem appropriate.

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