Reflecting for Change: How Pedagogical Diploma Assignments Become Reflective Boundary Objects for Change of Practice

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Abstract

This study explores how pedagogical diploma assignments act as reflective boundary objects that support teachers in transforming their practice. Drawing on 212 assignments written by in-service teachers participating in a workplace-embedded diploma program in a Danish municipality, the study investigates how teachers reflect on and initiate pedagogical change by asking the following research questions:

1. Which pedagogical practices do the teachers notice and choose to investigate – and how?

2. What improvements to their own practice do they bring forward as a result of their investigations?

Anchored in Dewey's pragmatism, Benner's praxeological approach, and Mason's theory of noticing, the analysis reveals that teachers frequently focused on differentiated instruction, student motivation, inclusive practices, and classroom dynamics. These investigations lead teachers to critically examine their teaching through self-initiated inquiry. The assignments not only document changes in teaching methods but also demonstrate a shift in teachers' professional self-understanding and conceptual framing of pedagogy. Teachers often narrate their learning processes, linking personal experiences to broader educational theories, thereby bridging formal coursework with the realities of everyday class-

room practice. The findings highlight the transformative potential of diploma assignments when integrated within institutional models like the University School, which supports situated, autonomous inquiry. These reflective artifacts serve as tools for noticing, principled experimentation, and ethical reflection, enabling teachers to engage deeply with their practice. The study contributes to the field of reflective teacher education by presenting a model of partnership-based profession-didactical learning that emphasizes teacher agency and boundary-crossing reflection. It suggests that structured, experience-based inquiry can lead to meaningful, context-sensitive pedagogical development when embedded in supportive professional environments.

Introduction

Reflective Practice-based Learning (RPL) has emerged as a way to rethink how educators engage with their professional development, particularly in bridging the often-cited gap between theory and practice in education (Illeris, 2009). As educational systems worldwide grapple with the demands of preparing teachers not only for the classroom but for continuous pedagogical innovation, RPL offers a framework that foregrounds experiential learning, critical reflection, and situated inquiry. Rooted in traditions established by Schön (1983) and Dewey (2005), RPL emphasizes the cyclical relationship between action and reflection, whereby professionals actively interrogate their practices to generate meaningful insights and drive transformation (Horn et al., 2020). This paper contributes to this discourse by examining the role of pedagogical diploma assignments as reflective boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) meaning artifacts that mediate between formal educational structures and evolving professional practices. The empirical basis for this investigation is a large-scale professional development initiative undertaken in a southern Danish municipality. Teachers and subject-specific coaches from 20 schools participated in a workplace-embedded diploma program designed to foster reflective inquiry into their own teaching practices. Central to this program was the production of individual di-

ploma assignments, which served not only as academic deliverables but as structured opportunities for practitioners to investigate, theorize, and improve aspects of their pedagogical work. These assignments thus constitute a unique dataset that offers insights into how educators notice, interpret, and act upon challenges in their practice. The aim of this study is to explore how these pedagogical assignments mirror institutional learning and localized professional development. Specifically, we analyze 212 diploma assignments to address the following research questions: (1) Which pedagogical practices do the teachers notice and choose to investigate and how? (2) What improvements to their own practice do they bring forward as a result of their investigations?

Our findings offer a grounded understanding of how reflection is operationalized in professional learning, what types of knowledge are foregrounded in teachers' inquiries, and how formal educational outputs can serve as levers for sustainable change in practice.

Theoretical conceptions

This study is grounded in a profession-didactical perspective that conceptualizes pedagogical diploma assignments as objects for engaging in reflective, practice-based experimentation. Drawing on the University School model (Hachmann et al., 2023; Albrectsen et al., 2024) our approach aligns with a pragmatic educational philosophy inspired by Dewey (2005), emphasizing experience, inquiry, and the learner's capacity for development (Bildsamkeit). Within this framework, campus-based learning and school-based practice are understood not as separate domains but as expanded frames (Engle, 2006) that invite practicing teachers into complex, pedagogical situations. These frames foster a productive tension between theoretical insight and practical experience, requiring participants to not only act but reflectively justify their actions in light of professional and educational principles. At the core of this perspective is Benner's (2015) praxeological approach to pedagogical experiments. These are not controlled trials but reflective actions initiated in response to unforeseen, situational demands in practice. A pedagogical experiment in this sense emerges when the practitioner, faced with pedagogical challenges, chooses to act based on practical principles rather than predetermined protocols. Benner argues that such principles are "basic conceptions qualifying the discussions about content" (2015,

p. 62), offering an interpretive compass to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate actions within complex pedagogical landscapes. This understanding reinforces our treatment of diploma assignments as documented traces of such experiments: moments where teachers attempt to articulate the 'why' behind their 'what', situating their decisions within broader frameworks of professional reasoning.

To understand how teachers become attuned to such moments and capable of reflective experimentation, we incorporate Mason's (2002) discipline of noticing—a phenomenological methodology for sensitizing practitioners to their own perceptual and cognitive patterns. Noticing is framed here not merely as perception but as an intentional act: noticing that something occurs and, more crucially, noticing for action. Building partly on Schön (1983) Mason's work emphasizes the recursive nature of noticing—how it is cultivated over time through disciplined reflection and dialogic engagement, making practitioners more responsive and generative in their pedagogical thinking. This theoretical move aligns with our empirical interest in what teachers choose to notice and reflect upon in their assignments, and how these choices shape their sense of agency and capacity for change. The intersection between Benner's praxeology and Mason's noticing highlights a vital dynamic: the act of reflecting on pedagogical events is not a post-hoc rationalization but an intrinsic part of professional inquiry. This is further enriched by the notion of expanded framing (Engle, 2006), which conceptualizes learning environments as interconnected spaces that support the transfer and transformation of knowledge across institutional boundaries. In our study, diploma assignments serve as boundary objects that mediate this expansion. They are authored within academic contexts but rooted in real-world classroom events, prompting a dialogue between theory and action, between theory and profession (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Importantly, this reflective process is not ideologically prescriptive. Instead, it respects the existential dimensions of teacher development, allowing practitioners to construct their own professionalism and practice through inquiry and experimentation. This aligns with Biesta's (2015) critique of technical-rational approaches to school practice and his call for more educationally constitutive practices that honor the complexity of becoming and being a professional teacher. The University School model embodies this ethos, offering a space where professional development is driven not by compliance with pre-

determined methods but by engaged, context-sensitive inquiry rooted in the teacher's own experiential terrain (Carlsen et al, 2024).

In summary, our theoretical framework positions pedagogical diploma assignments as both reflective artifacts and active mediators of professional growth. They embody the convergence of noticing, principled action, and boundary-crossing inquiry, grounded in a pedagogical stance that values autonomy, reflection, and situated experimentation. This framework enables us to explore how teachers come to see their own practice as a site of inquiry—how they learn to notice, reflect, and act with greater intentionality and educational sensitivity.

## Methods and analytical framework

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based approach to investigate how pedagogical diploma assignments written by in-service teachers function as reflective boundary objects and praxeological experiments. Situated within the University School model and its profession-didactical orientation, the research design is informed by a pragmatic epistemology (Dewey, 2005), emphasizing inquiry embedded in lived experience.

The empirical material comprises 212 diploma assignments written by teachers and subject-specific coaches participating in a large-scale, practice-embedded continuing education initiative in a southern Danish municipality (2020–2024). The initiative aimed to contribute to the development of even more inquiry-based and experimental teaching practices with the meaningful integration of IT (Formål og ansøgning – Universitetsskolen). The diploma program was designed to be workplace-based, integrating theoretical coursework combined with participants' ongoing small-scale experiments in their daily teaching practice. As part of the program requirements, participants submitted final written assignments that documented their pedagogical inquiries, interventions, and reflections. The assignments serve multiple purposes across different contexts and can be viewed from various perspectives (Duch, 2021). For the student — that is, the teacher participating in the professional development program — the study context and the assessment of the assignment through grading may hold significant importance. For others, the key concern is the potential impact of the inquiry through colleagues and school leaders within the school context. These and many other perspectives are legitimate and important. In this study, we

view assignments as objects of study and as analytical lenses for examining how practitioners engage in reflective inquiry within institutional frameworks. The assignments are regarded as a source of knowledge about what teachers choose to investigate under particular conditions. Consequently, we have not concerned with the grades assigned to the teachers' assignments.

Data collection involved the systematic gathering and anonymization of all available assignments completed within the project's duration. In alignment with the study's two guiding research questions the assignments were then subjected to qualitative document analysis, with a dual focus: (1) identifying the area of focus i.e., the pedagogical practices that teachers chose to investigate, and (2) categorizing the types of changes or improvements they reported making to their practice as a result of their inquiries. The layered analysis of how teachers notice, frame, and act upon problems of practice. The analytical process was iterative and inductive, drawing from Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. First, all assignments were read for general familiarization, followed by the initial coding of sections where teachers explicitly described what they noticed in their practice and what they aimed to change. These codes were refined through repeated rounds of analysis, clustered into emergent themes that captured recurring patterns across the dataset.

Figure 1: A visualization of our coding process inspired by Braun & Clarke (2006)
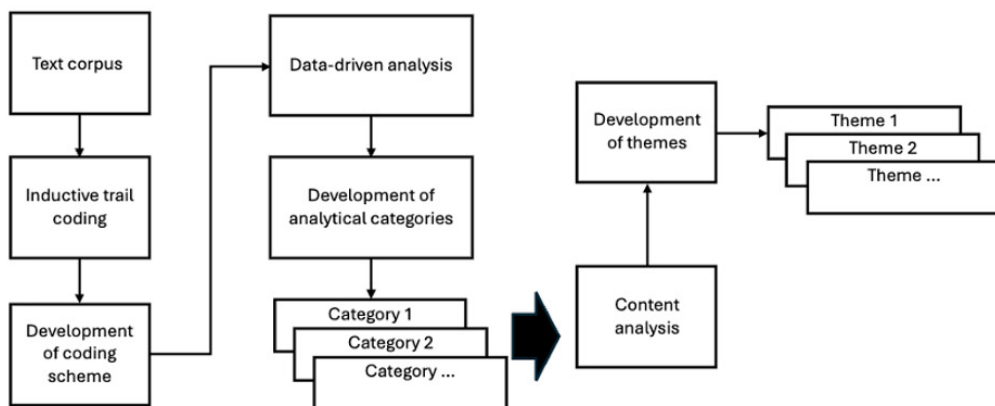
Given the study's emphasis on practitioner experience and reflective articulation, the validation of findings does not rest on representativeness in a statistical sense but on interpretive depth and resonance with the educational field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through collaborative analysis among researchers, who reviewed a subset of assignments together to ensure consistency in thematic coding and interpretive alignment. Ethical clearance was secured through institutional procedures, with all identifying information removed and informed consent obtained for the secondary analysis of assignments.

Overall, our approach supports an in-depth understanding of how teachers conceptualize and document their reflective inquiries within their practie. The assignments are treated not only as evidence of individual learning but as pedagogically generative texts that inform broader discussions about professional growth, reflective teaching, and the role of institutional scaffolding in practice-based education.

Findings

As described, the professional development program had an explicit focus on the development of inquiry-based teaching within the subjects of Danish, mathematics, and special education programs. We therefore expected that the teachers' curiosity would be directed towards these phenomena; however, the analyses show that the teachers chose to investigate a range of different pedagogical practices. The analysis of the 212 pedagogical diploma assignments reveals a rich tapestry of teacher-initiated inquiries, each embedded in localized professional challenges. Guided by our two central research questions, we present the findings in two major thematic domains: (1) the pedagogical practices teachers chose to investigate; and (2) the improvements they reported—the improvements enacted or envisioned as outcomes of their reflective inquiries.

What Teachers Notice and Investigate

The diploma assignments provide insight into what teachers found pedagogically significant or challenging in their daily work. Across the dataset, several recurrent thematic clusters emerged, often overlapping and contextually entangled. The table below systematically summarizes the

identified themes, examples of subcodes, and examples from the data material.

Figure 2: Visualization of the thematic analysis

Theme	Subcodes (examples)	Examples from the data
1. Motivation	Increasing students' motivation Motivation through inquiry-based teaching	"Can students' written motivation and engagement be strengthened through the use of the online writing tool Book Creator?" (k_5_læ_da_1) "Can playful and inquiry-based teaching approaches help increase motivation for practicing methods and basic skills in mathematics?" (K_3_læ_ma_1)
2. Multimodality	Multimodal student productions (e.g., BookBento, Book Creator) Digital tools (e.g., GeoGebra, Co-Spaces)	"Can the digital program Co-Spaces support literature teaching in Danish so that students become more exploratory and experimental in their learning?" (K_20_ve_it_1) "Does the integration of multimodal student productions such as BookBento in literature teaching enhance students' motivation for reading at the intermediate level, with particular focus on grade 6?" (K_2_vejl_da_1)
3. Writing and Oral Skills	Increasing motivation for writing Supporting oral participation	"How can I explore whether a creative, interdisciplinary opening to the writing process motivates students to write?" (k_15_læ_da_8) "Can videos be used to promote students' oral skills in mathematics teaching?" (k_9_læ_ma_2)
4. Well-being, Relationships, and Self-esteem	Enhancing students' self-esteem Relationship and community building	"How can we contribute to developing young people's self-esteem and self-confidence?" (K_3_læ_da_6) "What is the relationship between teacher-student relations and motivation among students with socio-emotional difficulties?" (k_4_læ_sp_13)

Theme	Subcodes (examples)	Examples from the data
5. Inquiry-based and Differentiated Teaching	Inquiry-based approaches in Danish and mathematics Differentiated instruction	"Does an inquiry-based and dialogue-centered approach to literature affect students' engagement, motivation, and persistence?" (K_6_læ_da_3) "What are students' views on good teaching — including their needs for classroom management, variation in teaching, differentiation, and involvement in lessons?" (K_18_læ_ma_2)
6. Special Needs and Inclusion	Inclusion of students with special needs Language and communication challenges Dyslexia support	"How can regular use of outdoor education contribute to personal development and academic learning among students with special needs?" (k_4_læ_da_7) "How can I incorporate iPads in poetry analysis in ways that support the learning of students with dyslexia?" (K_3_læ_da_5)
7. Collaboration	Team collaboration Co-teaching	"How can storytelling from practice strengthen team collaboration around students with disabilities?" (k_4_læ_da_12) "How does the team collaborate with parents?" (k_4_læ_sp_7) "What is the impact of co-teaching on students' well-being and academic outcomes?" (k_5_læ_al_1)

One prominent area was differentiated instruction, frequently explored through questions of how to better accommodate diverse learner needs in heterogeneous classrooms. Teachers described challenges in balancing support and challenge and experimented with varied instructional modalities, scaffolding techniques, and learner autonomy to enhance differentiation. Another prevalent focus was pupil motivation and engagement, particularly in reading and literacy across subjects. Teachers often used pupil feedback and observational data to notice disengagement, prompting investigations into multimodal texts, gamified reading experiences, or thematic cross-curricular projects. Similarly, inclusive education practices surfaced as a key areas, with educators reflecting on how classroom structures, routines, and materials either supported

or excluded specific learner needs—socially, emotionally, or cognitively. A third domain was classroom culture and relational dynamics, with teachers exploring how classroom interactions shaped learning environments. This included inquiries into authority and pupil voice, classroom agreements, socio-emotional learning, and teacher presence. Co-teaching and collaboration with colleagues also emerged as sites of inquiry, reflecting a broader organizational orientation to reflective practice and shared professional learning.

From an overall perspective, our analysis shows that what teachers noticed and their pursued inquiries were not based on institutional mandates but on felt needs arising from their embodied experiences in classrooms. They often framed their inquiries around moments of uncertainty, dissatisfaction, or curiosity—aligning with Benner's (2015) view of pedagogical experiments as situated responses to real-time pedagogical disruptions.

What Teachers Change or Envision Changing

The second analytical strand centred on what teachers claimed to have changed or aimed to improve through their developmental work. These responses revealed both immediate classroom-level changes and more abstract shifts in pedagogical thinking and, to some extent, changes in professional identity. Many teachers reported changes in how they designed lessons and organized classroom activities. Examples included more structured pre-assessments to inform differentiated planning, incorporation of new instructional materials (e.g., visual aids, graphic organizers), or altered physical layouts to support Pupil interaction. Several teachers noted a move toward more dialogic and pupil-centered teaching, creating space for peer learning and metacognitive reflection among Pupils. Some educators articulated changes in their ways of seeing their pupils and their teaching. They reported increased sensitivity to classroom dynamics, a more nuanced understanding of learner diversity, and a heightened awareness of the assumptions underlying their pedagogical choices. In Mason's (2002, 2021) terms, these improvements suggest not just new actions but new noticings, with teachers developing an expanded perceptual and interpretive repertoire.Some of the diploma assignments also revealed systemic aspirations on an institutional level, such as advocating for more collaborative planning time in their schools or mentoring colleagues using insights gained through the developmen-

tal work. In this way, the improvements moved beyond the individual to touch on institutional structures and cultures of professional development. Notably, the assignments often blended narrative and analytical modes. Teachers described their experiences richly—sometimes with emotional candor—and then linked these to broader educational concepts or theories encountered in the diploma program.

For instance, a teacher notes:

> *It has been an educational and exciting journey. From instruction and supervision at the University School to narrowing down the area of interest, formulating the research question, and finally choosing a data collection method, analyzing the data, and presenting the results in this assignment. I have answered my research question and can conclude that the 'Livsmesterlinjen' (Life Mastery Track) supports the pupil's well-being and, thereby, their motivation for participating in classroom teaching. (k_4_læ_da_10 o)*

In this reflection, the teacher offers a deeply personal and emotionally authentic account of their developmental journey throughout the inquiry process. The experience is clearly linked to broader concepts such as pupil well-being and motivation, and how these were examined and understood through both practical experiences and theoretical insights gained during the diploma program. This illustrates a strong connection between personal experience and professional development. This combination of personal narrative and conceptual reasoning is characteristic of reflective practitioner writing and underlines the function of the assignments as boundary objects—bridging individual experience and institutional knowledge structures (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Star & Griesemer, 1989).

The findings suggest that pedagogical diploma assignments support a dual process: they scaffold noticing—what is pedagogically significant or problematic—and they support principled reflection leading to action. The topics chosen reflects deep engagement with the experiential dimensions of teaching, while the improvements signal a shift toward more intentional, inquiry-based practice. The assignments thus function not only as reflective documentation but also as catalysts for personal and institutional learning—supporting the claim that they are, indeed,

reflective boundary objects that mediate between the formal structures of university education and the organic complexity of school practice.

Discussion

The findings from the analysis of 212 pedagogical diploma assignments highlight the multifaceted ways in which teachers engage in reflective inquiry and enact change through situated pedagogical experimentation. This section discusses these findings through the lenses of Benner's praxeological pedagogy, Mason's discipline of noticing, and the broader theoretical framework of boundary crossing, with particular attention to how these reflective processes are supported by the University School's profession-didactical structure.

One of the most salient patterns emerging from the data is the teachers' ability to identify and pursue pedagogically significant issues rooted in their daily experiences—often those that were messy, ambiguous, or emotionally charged. These moments, when reflected upon systematically through the structure of the diploma assignment, became what Benner (2015) refers to as pedagogical experiments: actions taken in response to real-time disruptions that required practical reasoning and principled judgment. These were not random interventions but thoughtful engagements with dilemmas of practice, framed by the teachers' own developing sense of what constitutes meaningful, legitimate, and professional educational action. This reflective engagement was made possible by the structured opportunity to document and theorize their practice, indicating that the diploma assignments functioned as more than assessments—they operated as reflective boundary objects (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Star & Griesemer, 1989). They connected institutional demands for academic rigour with the unpredictable, relational nature of classroom practice. Within these texts, teachers moved between descriptive narrative and conceptual analysis, a movement that exemplifies the crossing of institutional boundaries and the co-construction of practice-based knowledge. The prominence of differentiated instruction, inclusion, and pupil engagement as a focus suggests that teachers are deeply attentive to pupil variability and relational dynamics. Teacher noticing became both a selective and prospective act as the teachers were not simply identifying surface-level phenomena; they were developing a refined professional gaze—an attunement to the nuances of learning

environments and an orientation toward informed pedagogical responses. In this way, the diploma assignments scaffolded and helped teachers to reframe their understandings of pupils, content, and their own roles as professionals.Resonating with the University School model's commitment to honoring the capacity of individuals to shape and be shaped through educational experiences (Benner, 2001), the improvements that teachers proposed and implemented often went beyond technical adjustments; they reflected deeper shifts in pedagogical reasoning and professional identity. Rather than prescribing solutions, the model encourages an existential approach to education, wherein teachers are afforded the space to develop their own principles of good practice through structured, experience-based reflection. The assignments thus served as sites of pedagogical formation, where professional selves were not merely affirmed but actively negotiated and reconfigured.

In sum, the diploma assignments analyzed here illustrate the generative power of reflective practitioner inquiry when supported by a pedagogically constitutive environment. They show how noticing and experimenting can lead not only to improved practice but also to deeper understandings of what it means to teach well, ethically, and responsively. In this way, they point toward a model of reflective practice-based learning that is both rigorous and humane—anchored in experience, driven by inquiry, and oriented toward meaningful educational transformation.

Conclusion and implication of our study

The analysis of pedagogical diploma assignments has revealed how structured reflection embedded in practice-based education can catalyze both individual and institutional transformation. By conceptualizing these assignments as reflective boundary objects, we have shown how teachers engage in situated noticing, principled experimentation, and professional identity development. These processes are made possible within the University School's profession-didactical framework, which affords teachers space, legitimacy, and resources to inquire into their own practice. One key implication is the potential for pedagogical assignments to be intentionally designed not just as assessment tools, but as developmental instruments that bridge theory and practice. Teacher education programs can draw from this model to scaffold assignments that require practitioners to reflect on lived pedagogical challenges, invoke relevant

educational principles, and document their processes and insights in a way that contributes to both personal and communal knowledge.

Another implication concerns the institutional structures that support or hinder reflective practice. The findings emphasize the importance of organizational support for inquiry-based learning—time, feedback, and collegial collaboration are essential for reflection to move beyond compliance and into transformation. Schools and educational systems that value teacher agency must consider how such reflective infrastructures can be sustainably embedded within continuing professional development.

Finally, the study reaffirms the value of a pedagogically constitutive approach that balances existential autonomy with profession-didactical scaffolding. In this balance, teachers are not simply implementers of fixed curricula or strategies but engaged thinkers capable of shaping their practice through disciplined noticing and principled experimentation. As educational discourse increasingly emphasizes evidence-based practice, it is crucial to remember that teacher-generated knowledge, rooted in reflective inquiry, remains a vital and underutilized resource.

Reflective Practice-based Learning, as exemplified through the work of these Danish educators, provides a compelling model for the future of practice-oriented education—one that is inquiry-driven, context-sensitive, and deeply human in its commitment to growth and transformation.

Although not within the scope of our study, institutional and structural conditions are necessary for such reflective practice to flourish. The success of the diploma assignments as reflective boundary objects depended not only on individual teacher motivation but on the affordances of the University School framework: time for inquiry, access to mentorship, and recognition of practitioner knowledge as valid and valuable. Without these conditions, the risk remains that reflective writing becomes a compliance exercise rather than a transformative practice. The implications of this extend beyond the local context of Danish school development. In an international landscape where teacher education often veers toward competency-based and prescriptive models (Biesta, 2015), this study might offer an alternative: a model of profession-didactical reflection rooted in inquiry, responsiveness, and educational responsibility. It suggests that the future of practice-oriented education lies not in narrowing the scope of teacher decision-making but in expanding the

reflective and pedagogical agency of practitioners through carefully scaffolded, situated, and principled work.

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