



## A Teacher's Diary as a Research Instrument to Determine the Integration Process of a Beginner Teacher into Daily Life at a Primary School

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### 1. The beginning teacher

The beginning teacher is perceived as a teacher starting to work after graduating from the university and teaching for no more than three years. Afterwards his/her position changes. The time span defining the status of a beginning teacher differs in every country and is related to the concept of life-long education. The beginning teacher faces many challenging tasks when starting teaching. The role of a student he/she played for several years suddenly turns into the role of a teacher. Thus, the beginning teacher becomes the one who must plan the teaching activity, organize the course of instruction, and takes over responsibility for students in the classroom. According to Veenman [1], the first year of teaching praxis is very demanding and one of the most difficult stages in the whole career. Teachers experience a "reality shock" in the first year. According to Lortie, this can be caused by teachers being isolated in classrooms [1] or by the fact that the centre of their university program curriculum was mostly made of theoretical disciplines. Beginning teachers often experience insecurity, stress, they feel as if they were "lost in the sea" [2]. That's why relevant education ministry workers in individual countries try to incorporate help for beginning teachers in the praxis into legislation by introducing the concept of life-long education.

Each country searches for the most suitable system of helping the beginning teachers establish themselves in the school environment. Such system was legislatively introduced in Slovakia in 2009. In its context, beginning teachers start with the adaptation training after they start to work as teachers and that is the first stage of their continuous training. The current generation of young teachers is relatively self-confident and ambitious. Recent research reports [8] suggest that teaching faculty graduates come to praxis with a relatively high degree of self-efficacy. This fact too is in contradiction with the views about students being excessively burned with theoretical disciplines. Current young teachers have the feeling they can master the teaching process as well as other areas related with the teaching profession. For example, student discipline, parent involvement etc. However, a point of break comes usually a half year later. It depends mainly on the level to which a "novice" adjusted to the existing system and to what extent he/she asserts his/her own imaginations and convictions.

We have already mentioned researches analysing the establishment of beginning teachers in the praxis. However, it usually involves quantitative studies mapping the position of a beginning teacher in a wider context. Such research efforts bring new discourse issues focusing on the possibilities of monitoring the daily work of a beginning teacher through qualitative indicators.

### 2. Teacher diary as a research instrument of educational research

One of the options of how to analyse the daily work of a beginning teacher in the praxis is to analyse the **teacher diary**. One could say that the teacher diary is, to a certain extent, a continuation of student-teaching portfolio that was being developed when carrying out the obligatory student teaching as part of university studies. However, the teacher diary already provides a real reflection of the school life. It is not a simulation created during student teaching under more ideal conditions. More ideal conditions for example involve also the fact that faculties can choose their own lab schools. The teacher diary is however a mirror of reality and of what the teacher in the given moment, in the given situation actually goes through. The beginning teacher can depict problems as well as joys encountered daily which opens up new possibilities for further analyses. The diary serves as a "listening friend" for the given subject. An internal dialogue takes place during writing which has an important self-reflective value for the teacher. The diary opens the door to a secret, uncharted world, to a fragile reality, which is another reason why it stirs interest in educational research. According to the authors Maňák, Švec, Š., Švec, V. (ed.), the diary is a "personal document of a subject serving to depict experienced and subjectively perceived situations and events" [3]. It is the subjective experience of a teacher and all events in school that he/she considers to be important and which he/she believes have an impact on him/her that can bring new knowledge in the life of a beginning teacher. Taghilou [4] considers the diary to be the simplest way of targeted reflection of a teacher and his/her reflective instruction. The teacher diary is used in educational research more sporadically. It is because teachers disclose their internal experiences when writing the diary and the processing of statements is often time demanding. The work on one's own teacher diary, though time demanding, is unquestionably important in terms of the teacher's progress, improvement and analyses of one's own processes of self-evaluation. In other words, it is an investment in one's own improvement. Zeki [5] also emphasised in his works the positive aspects of using a diary in the teaching profession. He argues that the teacher diary is an important self-regulating strategy. If we thus see the beginning teacher as a "novice" in the school-life reality, then writing a teacher diary can significantly impact the development of his/her professional competencies. Penso, Shoham, Shiloh [6] emphasise, based on the analysis of their research, that the level of reflection of a beginning teacher is very low. Šimoník equally points



out [7] that beginning teachers are not able to undergo objective self-reflection and to evaluate their work. That's why a diary of a beginning teacher can support the development of the mentioned areas. It can also serve as a mean of facing excessive emotions that accompany the first steps of a teacher in school. After the end of the working time, only few beginning teachers can "reset" their thinking and not think about what they went through during the day. That is the reason why writing a diary can be a certain instrument of materialising feelings and opinions that are hard to describe in words. To a certain degree, we can thus say that writing a diary can have therapeutic effects as well. The work of a teacher is rich in interactions, especially in the process of primary education, because the beginning teacher is in the position of a class teacher. He/she is in constant contact with students, teaches them, educates them, listens to family stories, monitors the situation in the group of children, deals with ordinary conflicts in group, and oversees the safety of children. Teachers can process their opinions in a diary. These are often more authentic in this form. After some time, the teacher can come back to the given situation. He/she can then better analyse what happened, how he/she responded and managed to deal with the given situation.

Writing a teacher diary is an interesting research instrument. It enables to detect:

Process of introduction into the school environment in a fine, sensitive way with unique expression value; Art of work of a beginning and introducing teacher; Dealing with the new environment on the part of the beginning teacher; Work of the teacher body; Habits and stereotypes of the teacher body; School management;. Maňák, Švec, Š., Švec, V. (ed.) [3] distinguish between two forms of a diary – the structured and non-structured form. **The structured diary** should contain a clear set of instructions about what and how to write indicating a specific example of what is correct. The subject must exactly know what is expected to be recorded, in what time interval, in what extent and with what purpose. Clarity is ensured if one page covers one period of study – a day, week or month. At the end, several pages should be left for free notes. **The non-structured diary** on the other hand, unlike the structured one, enables a deeper analysis. A researcher can find implications that could not be found in a structured diary. Considering the great number of subjects, it is however more time demanding to process. Another positive aspect is that it creates a more open atmosphere, because subjects of research know what the researcher is examining. The written statements of subjects are free and the scope of statements does not have to be limited, unless the nature of research requires it. Based on the research results that we are currently analysing [9] we believe that we can talk also of another form of diary processing, which is the **combined form**. As the name suggests, it is a certain combination of the above-mentioned forms. When creating such form of diary, it is possible to put down the feelings and opinions in an unstructured way first. Based on these, concept categories can be developed with more structured lines. Such process or working with the combined diary provides researchers with initial freedom when carrying out the research, when searching for various implications and meanings. It consequently enables more precise specification and focusing on the examined phenomena and their deeper analysis. Naturally, working with the combined diary requires focused cooperation of the researcher and the subject of research.

From the aspect of the educational research it is necessary to describe the positive and negative aspects of applications of such developed research instrument.

**Advantages** of working with a diary include the following:

- It enables to describe situations that are harder to handle in person;
- The subject can come back later to his/her statements later (the subject can e.g. add something later);
- It has therapeutic effects;
- It enables reflection of one's own work;
- It minimises the feeling of the subject that research is involved;
- It creates better conditions for preventing distortion of statements, since they are recorded by the subject him/herself;
- The subject him/herself can decide when the diary is to be written and how much time will be devoted to it;
- The subject can choose the form in which he/she will write the diary – electronic, written.

The following can be considered as **disadvantages**:

- Demanding attracting of subjects for research sample (due to the length of research, time required for frequent writing);
- From the aspect of participating subjects recording their ideas instead of an interview which is shorter;
- Possible briefness in writing in case of non-structured form of diary;
- Possible complexity, disputability in the interpretation of the acquired data;

The possible disputability in the interpretation of the acquired data can be prevented if the researcher applies also other methods and techniques apart from the diary. That way, the acquired data gain completeness and provide clearer findings.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to focus attention at the application of the diary as a research instrument on the part of beginning teachers. Writing a diary by a beginning teacher could become an obligatory part of the process of introduction during the adaptation training in order to achieve targeted improvement of self-reflective competencies. This could however lead to a loss of openness on the part of the monitored subject. Beginning



teachers could adjust the written data in their fear about who the readers of their diary can be. I therefore point out that the teacher diary should become neither an instrument of legislative aid nor of formal strategies of life-long education. The applicability of the diary always depends on the purpose it is supposed to serve. Internet blog or website are currently used as new forms of diary.

A diary of a beginning teacher brings new knowledge. It opens possibilities to see the “internal experiences” of a teacher, enables to analyse school environment and last but not least supplements the whole range of research instruments in education-oriented research.

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