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Learning through life and the ethics of teaching: a story told in fifteen voices

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ABSTRACT

Attempting to connect theoretical arguments for the primacy of ethics in teachers' practice to real life experience we interviewed fifteen teachers from Greece and Iceland.

The stories they told were in accord with a broadly Aristotelian notion of moral development. They saw their moral education as process that began early in life and continued through years of work, where the latter stages required opportunities to engage in deliberations about human affairs.

Our results suggest that, when thinking about the moral education of teachers, we should focus not only on preservice education but also on lifelong professional development.

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Introduction

This paper is based on interviews with fifteen experienced teachers, eight from Greece and seven from Iceland. We asked them to tell us how they learned to teach. When analysing the interviews, we focused on what they said about teaching as a moral work that requires character education, ethical virtues, and practical wisdom. Initially we assumed that teaching belongs to a type of occupation where good and successful work depends to some extent on moral character. We did, however, not expect our diverse group of teachers, from two countries with different traditions of schooling, to tell almost the same story about their ethical and professional development. Nevertheless, that is what they did. Neither did we expect their answers to fit into any one framework of moral theorising. However, as our work progressed, we saw Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics as accommodating most of what the teachers told us.

The primacy of ethics in teachers' practice

Arguments for the primacy of ethics in teachers' practice can be found in publications from the latter half of last century by leading scholars in the field of education such as Peters (1966), and Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993). Since the turn of the century, the literature on teacher education and the professional development of teachers has generally become even more focused on ethics (Kristjánsson 2011). In recent years,

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thinkers as diverse as Biesta (2015), Campbell (2003, 2013a), Carr (2006, 2007, 2011, 2014), Dunne (2011), Higgins (2011, 2015), and Kristjánsson (2011) have argued for the importance of ethics in teacher education and professional practice.

Most of the works cited so far are philosophical rather than empirical. There is, however, a growing body of empirical research indicating that teachers and teacher candidates perceive teaching as a moral work and want to become teachers for reasons that are primarily altruistic (Sanger and Osguthorpe 2011; Osguthorpe and Sanger 2013a, 2013b; Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, Brown, and Carr 2015).

In their introduction to a collection of papers on the ethical aspects of teaching and teacher education, Sanger, Osguthorpe, and Fenstermacher (2013) say that teaching is by its very nature a moral work in two conceptually distinct but overlapping ways: On the one hand, teachers ought to teach morally and, on the other hand, they must to some extent teach morality.

One strand of the academic discourse on the ethics of teaching is about the personal qualities one has to develop to become a good teacher. Carr argues for instance that the professional effectiveness of teachers is 'enhanced by the possession and exercise of personal qualities and practical dispositions that are not entirely (if at all) reducible to academic knowledge or technical skills' (Carr 2007, 369). This does not imply that being kind and fair-minded is all it takes to teach morally. As, for instance, Higgins (2011), Campbell (2003, 2013a), and Kristjánsson (2011) have pointed out, a kind disposition does not suffice to enable teachers to take the best course of action in all the complex situations that come up in schools. That ability requires both knowledge of local conditions and practical wisdom in addition to goodness of heart. Although professional morality is an extension of everyday morality, it is an extension that needs careful thought and discussion. Carr, Higgins, Campbell, and Kristjánsson, like some other scholars who work within a broadly Aristotelian framework, therefore argue that teachers' education and professional development should aim at practical wisdom (*phronesis*), the intellectual virtue Aristotle described in Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Dunne makes a similar point, saying that 'a teacher may face a situation in which academic standards, psychological needs, considerations of safety, and the demands of social equality … pull in contrary directions – but in which one must make some judgment and decision' (Dunne 2011, 22–3).

Learning practical wisdom

Most recent works on teachers' need for practical wisdom are inspired by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he described practical wisdom as the very pinnacle of moral development and said that bad people could not acquire this intellectual virtue – its development required some measure of moral goodness. Among the hardest questions about the interpretation of Aristotle's moral philosophy are questions about the relation between goodness and wisdom, the ethical and the intellectual. These questions are with us still today. People still wonder to what extent wickedness precludes rationality. Some of the things Aristotle said about practical wisdom are hard to understand and scholars do not agree on how, exactly, it relates to the ethical virtues (Kristjánsson 2020, 17). The

educational and psychological ramifications of the concept are still uncharted, and more research is needed on how practical wisdom is acquired and how it supports virtuous conduct (Darnell et al. 2019; Kristjánsson et al. 2020; Grossmann et al. 2020).

Although practical wisdom both requires and supports the development of ethical virtues, it is, according to Aristotle, an intellectual virtue, i.e. an ability to find out what is true, not a disposition to act. It seems to involve both knowledge of what is generally good for people and the ability to read all sorts of circumstances and discern the values at stake (Darnell et al. 2019). The ethical virtues are different. They are primarily dispositions to have the right longings and emotions, and to do what is right rather than to know what is true.

On Aristotle's view of moral development, it is a process that begins in early childhood and continues through adult life. Young children learn to be virtuous to some extent, mostly through habituation and imitation. Later in life, people learn to reason and deliberate about ethical and political questions. As they gradually gain practical wisdom, their ethical virtues reach greater perfection (Harðarson 2019).

In the beginning of Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that just as people learn to play a musical instrument by playing, they also learn to be just and brave and temperate by doing what is just and brave and temperate. Likewise, he thought that people acquired practical wisdom by participating in deliberations on ethical and political issues (Harðarson 2019). Arguably it follows that the development of practical wisdom requires autonomy to some degree (Stengel 2013). If Aristotle was right, it requires at least some opportunities to engage in such deliberations.

Notwithstanding some thorny conceptual issues, the publications cited above give us reasons to think that teaching is essentially a moral work that requires moral character and practical wisdom. Most of these works support a broadly Aristotelian notion of moral development that begins early in life and takes a long time, lasting into adulthood, where the latter stages require deliberation and autonomous exercise of practical wisdom. These works are, however, rather abstract and leave the reader with open questions about how teachers do acquire the ethical virtues and the ethical knowledge they need to become good professionals, and to what extent, if any, professional ethics, or moral philosophy should be added to teacher education programmes.

These lacunae in current knowledge are recognised by scholars in the field, who have pointed out the uncertainties concerning what aspects of professional morality should be taught to teacher candidates and which virtues are most important for teachers. Although some reports on empirical research highlight the importance of honesty, fairness and kindness (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke, Brown, and Carr 2015; Arthur et al. 2019) the role of character in teacher professionalism is still undertheorized and, as Cooke and Carr said a few years ago, 'there is as yet no agreed or settled view of concepts of practical wisdom, character and virtue or about their general place in . . . the particular professional practice of teaching' (Cooke and Carr 2014, 92).

Given these uncertainties concerning what ethical knowledge is most important for teachers it is perhaps not surprising that in most teacher education programmes ethics is not a mandatory subject. According to a survey of teacher education in five countries, The United States, England, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands, only 24% of the 401 programmes reviewed contained a mandatory stand-alone ethics course (Maxwell et al.

2016). Some scholars have, however, argued that professional ethics is a missing foundation in teacher education (Campbell 2011, 2013b; Warnick and Silverman 2011; Shapira-Lishchinsky 2011).

There are gaps – unmapped territories – in the theoretical literature on the ethics of teaching and how it is learned. One way to start an exploration of how theoretical works on the ethics of teaching are relevant to teacher education and professional practice is to listen to what experienced teachers say about their own professional development and the ethical dimensions of their work. Therefore, we started with a broad and tentative research question about the place of ethics in teacher education.

Method

The data we collected are semi-structured interviews with eight teachers from the region of Thessaly in central Greece and seven teachers from West Iceland. Our subjects were all fully qualified teachers, eleven women and four men, six taught in kindergartens and nine in primary schools. They all had more than ten years of teaching experience. Five had been teaching school between 10 and 20 years, five between 20 and 25 years, and five for more than 25 years. We found them by asking around for experienced teachers who were seen by their principals and peers as successful. We did not in any way try to measure the quality of their work. Hence, our sample is simply 15 individuals who people in their local communities see as effective and experienced teachers.

Our subjects are listed in Table 1. The names are pseudonyms because our interviewees were promised anonymity. The interviews were all between 30 and 60 minutes in length. They were taken in February and March 2020 in the mother languages of the teachers, i.e. in Greek and in Icelandic.

In the interviews we did not use much explicit moral language. Many moral terms are, as Santoro has pointed out, 'too loaded with approbation or disapproval and prescriptions or prohibitions to operate descriptively in this kind of encounter' (Santoro 2015, 173–4). We wanted our subjects to reflect on their own experiences rather than to give their assent to suggestions that are recognised as morally correct. English translations of the initial questions we used in all the interviews are listed in Table 2:

Preparing the interviews, we used Adams (2015) as our guide. At first, we did not consistently follow any one method to analyse and interpret the interviews but as our work progressed, we used thematic analysis as described by Neuendorf (2019) and eventually our methods came close to what Clarke and Braun (2016) call theory driven thematic analysis.

Table 1.

Anna (G, F, K, 16)	Freyja (I, F, P, 11)	Rannveig (I, F, K, 26)
Birkir (I, M, P, 29)	Kleri (G, F, P, 23)	Svala (I, F, P, 41)
Dimos (G, M, P, 40)	Meri (G, F, K, 25)	Unnur (I, F, K, 23)
Embla (I, F, P, 34)	Myrto (G, F, K, 19)	Valur (I, M, P, 19)
Fani (G, F, K, 12)	Panos (G, M, P, 25)	Zina (G, F, P, 23)

G = Greek, I = Icelandic; F = female, M = male, K = teacher in kindergarten/preschool, P = teacher in primary school. Numbers indicate years of work experience as a teacher.

Table 2.

How did you learn to teach?
Which of the things you learned before you started teaching have been most useful?
What have you learned after you started teaching that has been useful?
Can you tell us about some experience that has helped you become a better teacher?
What does it mean for you to be a good teacher?
Do your opinions and what you have to say make a difference in your school?

After we had typed the interviews and translated the Icelandic ones into English (since only one of us understands Icelandic) we coded them and labelled everything that touched on the ethical dimensions of teaching, teacher education and professional development, and professional excellence or good teaching. Initially we worked separately on the interviews, each of us coding them independently. We met several times online, at first to discuss and revise our coding, and after that to discuss how to construct themes from the labels we had typed on the margins of the interview files. We had planned to meet and work on this together in summer 2020 but because of the Covid pandemic, travelling was too difficult.

The three overarching themes that we generated were influenced by our reading of theoretical works about the ethical dimensions of teaching and teacher professionalism. These three themes have to do with: Lifelong learning, the cultivation of humanity, and the need for deliberation. After reviewing our themes against the whole text of the interviews we found our teachers to have much more in common than we had expected. It turned out that much of what they said about their own character education was more like different versions of the same account than fifteen entirely independent life stories.

Results

Lifelong learning

All the teachers we interviewed had three to five years of teacher education at a tertiary level. Reflecting on how they learned to teach, however, they all described a process of education that was much longer than their years in college or university.

> Valur: Teacher education is something ongoing. . . . I think that a teacher who ceases to learn, who is no longer searching for new knowledge, someone who thinks he has learned what he needs to know . . . I think that teacher is going to have problems.

> Panos: One needs self-initiated and in-service training, what we call lifelong learning.

> Kleri: Pedagogy is, after all, lifelong learning.

> Fani: A good teacher is a teacher who never stops learning.

The phrase used by the Greek teachers that we translate as 'lifelong learning' is 'διά βίου μάθηση' [dia viou mathisi]. It means, literally, learning throughout life. Most of the learning the teachers described in detail was informal. Five of the seven Icelanders also mentioned though university courses they had taken after they began working as fully qualified teachers.

Asked specifically about their formal teacher education, they all said that it was only a part of their professional education, for some of them only a small part.

Zina: I think I learned to be a good teacher by myself. I am what they call an autodidact.

Dimos: I would not say that I learned anything of importance in Teachers College. Maybe, though, from some professors, especially those who had studied abroad and brought some new ideas about education. But they were not many.

Most of the teachers, did however see the teacher education programme as a useful part of a larger whole.

Meri: You get a good theoretical background from the University. To succeed in this job you need more, it requires a lot of in-service training and self-initiated work . . . the knowledge from the university is not enough.

Unnur: You ask about the college education . . . it was mostly theoretical and in everyday work one does not think much about theories, although one sometimes finds such knowledge useful.

Anna: From my studies I have only used a few things. It was first and foremost experience that helped me to learn how to teach. I became what I am through mistakes and successes. Also, through cooperation with my colleagues and books that I read.

Freyja: When I completed my preservice education then I felt that . . . I do not want to make little of what they were doing at that time . . . however, I felt that I was able to read through reports on complex research and books about this and that, but I did not know how to work in a classroom. . . . What I had learned when I graduated from teachers´ college was only a small part of what I needed to know. My first year as a teacher was a shock. Throughout the school year I kept asking why was I not prepared for this and that, why had no one told me?

Most of the positive remarks about the teacher education programmes were about the practical part, work placements, when our interviewees were sent as teacher candidates to work in schools. There were, however, some exceptions to this. Birkir for instance, responded positively to a question about what the teacher education programme did for him.

Birkir: A lot. It taught me . . . it structured . . . taught me to set aims. The teacher education programme helped me to become more organised . . . put my thoughts in order.

Another exception is Svala who participated in student activities in the 1970s when she and her schoolmates tried to change the teacher education programme.

Svala: I was part of a very vigorous group of students there. We wanted to do something new, and we tried to change the course of education offered at the Teachers College. At that time, the college was really a melting pot. . . . We were trying to change teacher education . . . and I even got a summer job working on proposals for a different teacher education curriculum.

Reflecting on their lifelong learning, more than half of the teachers mentioned role models from their own childhood.

Embla: Everybody knows what a good teacher is like and what a bad teacher is like. I learned that through being a schoolkid myself, and of course, the good ones, I took them as role models. . . . One respected them.

> Panos: I was lucky, because in primary school I had a very good teacher. He motivated me to become a teacher too. He conveyed to me a love of the world and a desire to change it, even though the changes we bring about may be small. He was a progressive man, with an open mind, he taught me the importance of working with joy . . . improving your work every day. I do not forget this teacher.

Some of them also mentioned experiences from their childhood and teenage years and, in our interviews, there are stories of growing up with people who cared about education or worked with disabled persons or minorities. There are also stories of participation in sports, coaching, and work with children. Here is one example:

> Unnur: My family . . . we used to help . . . we took disabled children to our home. I grew up with this . . . and my father was one of the founders of the sports club for disabled persons here in our town and I took part in that. I was a coach there for a while.

The stories from the early years of our interviewees are very diverse. What they have in common is that they describe childhood experiences as a part of a long process of moral education. Some of them are partially about ethical role models, some about learning sensitivity to human needs and respect for human diversity. When asked about what they had learned after they started working as teachers, the answers were not nearly as diverse. They all talked about the importance of learning from cooperation with other teachers. These four remarks are typical for the whole group of fifteen.

> Myrto: I learned how to teach mainly by following and observing my colleagues at school.

> Fani: I learned to teach mainly through discussions with colleagues. I was lucky because I had very good colleagues who were both experienced and interested in their work.

> Rannveig: The teachers teach each other. . . . We tell each other how best to approach the work, how to approach the children . . . how to choose your battles wisely.

> Dimos: I learned from my older colleagues at school. . . . They were experienced teachers, they knew how to keep order, so they were respected by students and by parents.

Cultivation of humanity – 'mannrækt' and 'φιλότιμο'

Most of our subjects expressed some opinions about what it takes to be a good teacher and they agreed that moral character is an essential condition. Some simply said that to be a good teacher one needs to be a good person. Others gave more complex accounts explaining what it takes to earn the respect of students.

> Meri: A bad person cannot be a good teacher. . . . Ethics and knowledge. That is what makes a good teacher.

> Zina: A teacher cannot be a bad person.

> Kleri: Good teachers are supportive. They support all their students and help them find their own way.

> Myrto: The teachers' morality affects the way they work.

> Valur: Successful teachers have some personal characteristics. . . . You need to read people and you need to be able reach them . . . I have mentioned the ability to communicate with people and one of the foundations of that ability is sincerity. You need to be sincere to earn their respect . . . and we need mutual respect.

One of the Greek teachers, Anna, used a beautifully succinct expression that is hard to translate literally.

> Anna: I do not believe that a bad person can be a good teacher. 'Βγαίνει ο χαρακτήρας στην δουλειά' [Vgainei o charaktiras stin douleia].

The Greek phrase may perhaps be best rendered: In this work your character comes out in the open.

Our subjects expressed different opinions about how moral character is acquired and some even talked about it as inborn rather than learned, and some said it came through upbringing that antedated their teacher education.

> Rannveig: Maybe it is something acquired through upbringing.

> Unnur: We sometimes joke about this in the extended family of my mother. We all work in this field, that is in teaching or something that is related to teaching. I think this is something we are borne with.

Notwithstanding these differences, much of the life-long informal education the teachers talked about, when they were asked how they learned to teach, was, broadly speaking, moral education. The content of it had to do with ethical virtues and practical wisdom.

Some mentioned virtues like patience, some talked about how they learned to care, or simply to become better persons. One of the Icelandic teachers, Rannveig, used the word 'mannrækt' to describe the professional development of the teachers in the kindergarten where she worked. This word means literally cultivation of humanity, tending to the growth of the humane.

> Zina: Little by little I learned to be patient. To listen to children and parents.

> Valur: My character has changed quite a lot through my job. . . . I have become softer and learned to cultivate more personal relations and work towards personal development of students. I have also learned to pay more attention to how they feel, and care about their personal and social development.

> Anna: I think that through this job I have become a better person. I learn new things every day. I learn to manage difficulties, to go beyond the traditional, to look for original ideas.

> Rannveig: We, the teachers, we take care of ourselves. It is about how I can become a better person . . . it is about 'mannrækt'.

Some of the things the teachers said are hard to translate accurately because the moral vocabulary they used contains nuances and connotations that are peculiar to their languages. For instance, one of the Greek teachers, Dimos, used the word 'φιλότιμο' [filotimo] which means literally a friend of honour, but this word connotes simultaneously conscientiousness, honesty, and concern with one's reputation.

> Dimos: The good teacher has 'φιλότιμο'.

Much of what the teachers said about their own moral education had to do with the ability to read all sorts of circumstances, to apprehend what is going on and what to expect of people.

> Rannveig: One learns to read the situations. A big part of this work consists in reading situations.
>
> Svala: Sometimes I also kept diaries on individual students … some of them were difficult, with behaviour problems … therefore, the last ten years, almost nothing has taken me by surprise … no matter what character types you come across, you've seen them before, and therefore they do not make you feel insecure. One gets to know what people can be like.

In the interviews, the teachers also talked about learning subject specific skills and other things that have little to do with professional ethics. Much of what they said about good teaching encompassed diverse elements, without any boundaries separating the ethical from the rest. Embla, for instance, emphasised the importance of knowing the subjects she taught. A little later, when reflecting on what she was doing in her classroom a few hours before the interview, it was clear that in her view successful teaching of mathematics required a combination of moral character and subject knowledge, patience, and ability to explain.

> Embla: Like this morning, we were doing equations and a girl said she could not understand, and I countered that we would not give up until she understood … we went through the problem again and again … They trust me to not give up.

The need for deliberation – 'I am too much alone'

Talking about their professional development and how they learned to teach, the teachers often mentioned the importance of being trusted and granted freedom to experiment. Most of them said they had opportunities to innovate and to influence both school curriculum and school administration. It was obvious that they cherished their autonomy.

> Myrto: My suggestions are heard. For example, I suggested organizing some afternoon workshops with parents and that was quite a success.
>
> Meri: I have a very good relationship with both colleagues and superiors. I feel that they take my proposals into account.
>
> Unnur: We have much freedom to do things our way, at least in my school. … If we want to emphasise classical music for one month then we just go ahead and do that.
>
> Svala: The work of the teacher can be made a creative work and I always took it for granted that I was allowed to make changes … that I could try new things and that I should have the courage to change again if something did not work, and that I should always be searching.

Talking about their professional autonomy, some of the teachers emphasised the importance of opportunities to deliberate and engage in discussions with colleagues.

> Embla: We need more discussion about the problems our students have. How to cooperate on making things better.

> Panos: For me it is very important to have a good relationship with colleagues, to have a climate of trust. We all have our own perceptions, our own beliefs. It is not easy for a teacher body of twenty different individuals to agree. It takes effort. We need to give way and we need to step back so we can find a common solution.

Talking about the need for deliberation, one of the teachers, Freyja, drew a distinction between being a faultfinder and engaging in critical discussion. She used the Icelandic word 'málefnalegir' that encompasses being candid, fair-minded, even-handed, and objective.

> Freyja: A little more than one year ago I found myself to be one of the faultfinders, one of the negative voices. I was under too much pressure and slipped into this sullen and grumbling mood. … I had to work on this, remind myself that I did not want to be a faultfinder. Notwithstanding, neither do I want to just follow the stream, go along with everything. I want to be critical. … That is not easy. Still there are some teachers who are critical and 'málefnalegir'. I want to be like them … to discuss things professionally.

This need for deliberating together, developing their professional competence through discussions with colleagues is a conspicuous common theme in the fifteen interviews. The teachers talked about deliberation as simultaneously vital to their own professional and moral development, and as a way to improve their practice. We give the last word to Birkir who reflected on his experiments with outdoor education.

> Birkir: In all this I do have quite a lot of freedom. Nevertheless, I would like to have someone with me. I am too much alone in this. I would like someone to cooperate with on developing outdoor education … and make it a part of schoolwork for all classes.

Discussion

At the end of our introduction, we touched on questions about the place of ethics in teacher education. Although our interviewees had much to say about the ethical dimensions of their work and their professional development, none of them talked about it as based on academic studies in moral philosophy or professional ethics. Possibly, they would have seen such studies as beneficial if moral philosophy had been a part of their preservice education. We wanted our subjects to reflect on their own experiences, so we did not ask hypothetical questions about what types of ethics courses would have been, or could have been, useful. Our data has therefore little bearing on questions about whether ethics should be taught as a subject in teacher education programmes. What the teachers said is, nevertheless, highly relevant to questions about how teachers learn the ethics of teaching.

The narrative about professional development, that the teachers told to us in fifteen voices, is in accord with a broadly Aristotelian notion of moral development that begins early in life and takes a long time, where the latter stages, leading to practical wisdom, require autonomy and opportunities to engage in deliberations about human affairs.

The teachers we interviewed all saw their education as a long process, one that was mostly informal. They described this long course of education as constituted in part by moral development, beginning early in life, and continuing through years of work. What they told us is not detailed enough to conclude with any certainty that their experience is wholly in accord with any specific Neo-Aristotelian account of ethics and ethical

development. Nevertheless, the bits and pieces about what our teachers learned early in life are consistent with Aristotle's view of early habituation as the foundation of ethical development. They also referred, albeit in some cases obliquely, to the need for professional autonomy, and talked about the importance of being trusted, granted freedom to experiment, and opportunities to deliberate and engage in discussions with colleagues. Those who elaborated on the intellectual aspects of ethical character talked about the ability to read all sorts of circumstances. What they said is at least reminiscent of how Aristotle described practical wisdom.

Our subjects also agreed that successful teaching requires ethical virtues, that the work of the teacher is a moral work. Although they had different notions of how these virtues were acquired, most of them seemed to think that at least some important elements of the requisite virtues were acquired long before their years in college, or university, where they had their formal teacher education. What they said about the need for basic moral goodness, acquired early in life, and how they saw their professional development as intertwined with ethical maturity, also fits into an Aristotelian framework.

Our teachers were all fully qualified in the sense that they had completed a teacher education programme that was acknowledged by the educational authorities in their countries. One of the interesting questions raised by the story they told is a question about what 'fully qualified' amounts to, if learning to teach is something that takes much longer than their formal preservice education. How can we simultaneously think of teacher education as schooling that takes a few years in college or university, and as character formation that begins early in life and continues into adulthood or even old age?

Our subjects said that they learned through deliberation and discussions with colleagues, that their professional development depended on freedom to experiment, and on being trusted and allowed to innovate. The story they told suggests that, when thinking about the moral education of teachers, we ought to focus on more than just how to encourage ethical virtues through teacher education programmes. One of the things we should be searching for additionally is how to facilitate cooperation initiated by teachers, deliberation, and lifelong professional development in their workplace.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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