Reflexive empathy as social relation: the case for contextualised professional learning

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises studies in professional learning through the novel lens of 'reflexive empathy'. Reflexive empathy draws on Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity, and positions it as an enabler of empathy to support researchers' approaches to providing contextualised, supportive professional learning for teachers who are involved in research studies. To argue this, we reflect on the results of a funded project, informed by Archerian reflexivity, which focused on improving writing in Australian primary schools. This article argues for the need to resist neoliberal approaches to professional learning by providing agentic, contextualised programs that value teachers' individual emotional, social, and cognitive responses to their participation in research informed co-designed professional learning.

Introduction

This article has a threefold purpose. First, we define a new term by drawing on the work of Margaret Archer (2010) 'reflexive empathy' for the benefit of professional learning paradigms in education. Second, we argue that reflexive empathy supports teacher agency as a form of epistemological exchange between researcher and teacher to support the formation of contextualised pedagogical knowledge. Third, we argue that reflexive empathy intervenes in the contemporary neoliberal landscape of professional learning where pre-packaged programs and a culture of 'tips and tricks' have informed the discourse of the teaching of writing and teachers' practice. This argument arises following the completion of a federally-funded study that drew on reflexivity to investigate the teaching of writing in Australian primary schools. This article is an epistemological exercise and critique of contemporary professional learning paradigms in Australia, and our goal here is to support future researchers and teacher educators in their thinking about the design and development of professional learning programs.

Reflexivity: a method of contextualisation

Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity is the social process of considering the self in relation to one's context (Archer, 2010). Archer describes 'the distinguishing feature' of reflexivity to be 'that it has the self-referential characteristic of "bending back" some thought upon the self, such that it takes the form of subject-object-subject' (2010, p. 2). Archerian reflexivity involves the navigation of the self in the world through internal conversation – encompassing self-referential consideration in relation to structural and cultural conditions – and associated action. Reflexivity considers personal conditions such as one's identity, worldview, knowledge, capabilities and desires (Personal Emergent Properties, PEP); along with cultural conditions such as prevailing expectations, norms and ideologies (Cultural Emergent Properties, CEP); and structural phenomena such as everyday processes, resources and policies (Structural Emergent Properties, SEP), to understand the reality of the self's existence in the world. These personal, cultural, and structural conditions always emerge in relation to each other, so every context is nuanced in its constitution. Reflexivity accounts for how these conditions (personal, cultural, and structural) operate in relation to one another to produce the form of the individual's context (Archer, 1996). One way of understanding the purpose of reflexivity is that it supports the agent in forming an epistemology of the self in relation to their unique context so agentic decisions may be performed, building up self-knowledge (Weinstock, Kienhues, Feucht, & Ryan, 2017).

Because of reflexivity's emphasis on the self and the way the self exists in relation to their context, it *may first appear* to be a dominantly self-oriented practice where the self and the personal considerations of the self are foregrounded in the practice of decision making. However, 'feelings about and connections to others are crucial to reflexive practices' (Holmes, 2010, p. 5). People navigate their ways through reflexive processes that involve relating to others, understanding others' individual commitments, and how their emotions influence their thoughts and actions (Archer, 2003).

The notion of empathy departs from the self and puts an emphasis on the way the self relates to others. Empathy is considered an other-oriented psychological and sociological process where the self is placed in secondary relation to the other for the purpose of understanding (Lanzoni, 2018). Empathy is often understood in relation to cognition and affect, where cognitive empathy includes the experience of *understanding* the thoughts and actions of another, and affective empathy includes the bodily experience of *feeling* emotions with another. We argue that empathy is also a reflexive (relational) process (Donati & Archer, 2015) requiring the subject to mediate emerging personal, structural, and cultural conditions to understand the thoughts and actions of another *in the context and under its conditions.*

In the sociological view of empathy, we become empathic through social interaction as we engage in verbal, and non-verbal communication with others and perform empathic actions that may serve varied social ends (Cooley, 1992). While the exact definition of empathy and its epistemic reliability is contentious, especially in relation to the distinct categories of cognitive and affective empathy (Coplan, 2011; Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016), we consider empathy in the context of this article to be an other-oriented reflexive process that blends the cognitive and affective roots of empathy. Our view of empathy here is typified by the subject imagining and understanding the thoughts,

actions, and feelings of another under specific emergent and relational conditions to a reasonably analogous extent. The subject may then draw on their empathic encounter to pursue reflexively defined 'projects' and build their knowledge of self in relation to the other (Donati & Archer, 2015). This self-knowledge may inform a course of action in the social context that leads to the reproduction or transformation of self and of society and potentially impacts the other.

Defining reflexive empathy

In this article, we bring Archer's theory of critical reflexivity into conversation with the subject of empathy. We argue that Archer's theory sits closely within our definition of empathy through its emphasis on the subjective process of engaging with context and reflecting on one's relationship to it. In this way, Archer's reflexive form of 'subject-object-subject' may be applied to our conception of empathy in this article by defining 'object' to explicitly mean 'the other' (Donati & Archer, 2015). In Archer's theory, the reflexive subject is always contending with the social world. She argues that 'our relationality must indisputably include social relations, making them part of us because we are ineluctably part of the social order' (2010, p. 8). In *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000), Archer describes emotions as 'commentaries upon our concerns' (p. 195), aligning human emotions with Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs). Archer argues that the 'rich inner life' of the emotions relates to the generation of 'personal identity' and thus cannot be a siloed quality of experience. Rather, the emotions as PEPs operate 'in conjunction with structural and cultural properties (the relationship between PEPs and SEPs and CEPs), that is, with *social identity*' (p. 194). Donati and Archer (2015) advance the emphasis on the relational subject by arguing that it is through relations, and the elements that compose the relation, that new social forms are generated. Archer's emphasis on the importance of human emotions, and Donati and Archer's explanation of the contextual nature of self-formation through relations, further exemplify the link between empathy and reflexivity.

Drawing reflexivity into conversation with empathy enables the reflexive subject to enter social exchanges with awareness of the PEPs, SEPs and CEPs that influence other points of view. As a result, the subject may possess a fresh perspective with the potential to make an appropriate choice within the context. Archer's theory provides a more nuanced understanding of (reflexive) empathy by considering the feelings and associated actions of the other in their emergentist social context and drawing on that consideration when making decisions that may impact them.

Reflexive empathy for research-informed professional learning

We argue that reflexive empathy may support partnerships between researchers and teachers in the context of educational research focused on professional learning. Research in professional learning has described teachers as reflexive professionals (Ryan & Bourke, 2013) and has emphasised the need for contextualised, relational programs that take time and respond to teachers' practice to support their participation (Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Ryan, Weber, Barton, & Dutton, 2023). A reflexive empathic approach has the potential to support positive relationships

between researchers who deliver professional learning and teachers in two interrelated ways.

First, a reflexive empathic approach enables teachers' agency. We argue this because reflexivity supports teachers who participate in professional learning programs to reflect on their practice and relate to the researcher regarding their unique needs and the needs of their students. If the researcher who delivers the professional learning is practising reflexive empathy, they can accurately respond to the needs of the teacher and support the development of their pedagogy in context. That is to say, reflexive empathy allows teachers to raise their voices in the context of professional learning programs and receive the support they feel they need. We also want to make clear that the researcher who develops and delivers the professional learning may note improvements acquired during the research process the teacher is not aware of. We found this to be the case in our study, specifically related to the usage of time (Ryan, Khosronejad, Barton, Kervin, & Myhill, 2021), and acknowledge the delicacy this requires in relation to reflexive empathy. Australian teachers are under increasing stress, pressure, and scrutiny in the media (CEP, SEP) and have been for decades which has directly impacted their professional identities (PEP) (Mockler, 2022a). The 'intervention' of research-based professional learning has the potential to raise negative feelings in this context for teachers. This may be due to the teachers' perception of the intervention's role in 'fixing' inadequate practice and outcomes. We were sensitive to the discomfort teachers anecdotally expressed regarding the role of external experts entering their classrooms and reframing current practice. However, given the contextual nature of reflexive empathy, the researcher can take this into account, alongside the perceived needs of the teacher, to improve their practice in a supportive way and acknowledge their professionalism and expertise.

From a sociological view (Ruiz-Junco, 2017), empathy is conceptualised as both a means to reduce social injustices as well as a requisite to social power to exacerbate exclusions (Cooley, 1962/1909). However, our adapted view of reflexive empathy aims to comprehend the other's context to support their agentic projects and actions. Therefore, researchers' and teachers' empathetic influence on each other empowers teachers as informed decision makers and promotes agency in their unique contexts. In this way, the relations produce new social forms.

Second, reflexive empathy facilitates a contextualised approach by researchers designing professional learning that is responsive to the needs of teachers. By socially engaging with the way teachers experience their contexts, and the feelings associated with this, researchers can provide contextualised programs that respond to learners' personal, cultural, and structural conditions. In the context of this paper as we reflect on the results of our study, we argue that the reflexive approach to our research allowed for reflexive empathy to emerge and inform our professional learning design. Our methodology included the ethnographic investigation of the sociocultural world of teachers and students and gathering of data through teacher and student interviews, observations, and collection of artefacts produced by participants. We analysed and reflected on this data and conducted a series of co-designed learning sessions that led to the development of nuanced activities and knowledge exchanges with and for teachers in response to our findings. This paradigm is reconsidered as a reflexive social exchange, with researchers engaging with and learning from teachers in an ongoing process of empathising,

reflecting, and acting. In what follows, we focus on professional learning regarding the teaching of writing, as Archer's theories have been applied extensively to the subject of writing as was this study (Ryan, 2014, 2017; Ryan et al., 2021, 2022, 2023).

The presentation of reflexive empathy in this article contributes to the growing literature on empathy as its own epistemology, by which we may utilise empathy for the purposes of understanding the development of others' knowledge (see Jaber, 2021; Stueber, 2006). Reflexive empathy takes the experiences and relations of the other into account for the purposes of supporting the development and acquisition of new knowledge that may enable the other to achieve agentic actions. We will show later in this paper how reflexive empathy's enablement of epistemological exchange pushes back against neoliberalism's encroachment on the education sector in the form of professional learning and 'tips and tricks' for teachers' writing pedagogies. In the section to follow, we respond directly to the empathy-altruism debate through our reflexive empathy lens.

A pragmatic response to the empathy-altruism hypothesis in education through reflexive empathy for teacher agency

The role empathy plays in improving the lived experiences of others is hotly debated. Batson (2010) has developed the 'empathy-altruism hypothesis' as a distinct empathic event, whereby 'empathic concern' results in altruistic behaviour. Empathic concern requires compatibility in feeling and experience on behalf of the empathiser with the object of empathy. Not all empathic acts are analogous, and thus not all empathy leads to an improvement in the well-being of others. Breithaupt and Hamilton (2019) coined the term 'dark empathy' to describe empathic acts involving malicious intent and the manipulative use of empathic knowledge. The risks of empathy have been discussed in the context of education, particularly where an individual may read a text to learn about the experiences of others (see Keen, 2007; Prinz, 2011; Wood, 2002). Boler (1999) has proposed the term 'passive empathy' to describe a reader consuming the experience of the other and making a false claim to knowledge as a result. She sees this as a problematic and potentially damaging practice of empathy in education, particularly in relation to novel reading as the reader may fetishise the experiences of the subject they claim to know through textual engagement. Boler's critique of empathy responds to the public notion of empathy as a 'cure' for society's ills in education, popularised by the work of Martha Nussbaum (1992, 2001, 2010).

The tension between empathic concern and passive empathy presents the need for a pragmatic way forward for empathy in education. In the study of professional learning, Archer's reflexivity provides a solution to this problem by foregrounding the necessity for self-reflection, regulation, and consideration of how personal, social, and contextual conditions affect the individual's ability to act. To practise reflexive empathy is to understand the other and reflect on one's relation to the other considering these contextual conditions. This form of knowledge – about the self and the self in relation to the other – may support analogous empathic experiences and mitigate the risks of passive empathy by introducing a secondary stage of reflexive thought and action. We cannot claim that the empathiser will *always* promote a reality that influences the relational 'good' (Donati & Archer, 2015) of the other, but we do argue that the addition of reflexivity to an empathic approach supports a richer and arguably, more conscious, approach to

empathising with others who may be directly impacted by the empathiser's decision making.

Rather than making broad claims about reflexive empathy's capacity for altruistic action, we argue that reflexive empathy may enable teachers' agency. We argue that this enablement of teacher agency is particularly achievable in the context of professional learning programs driven by reflexive research teams. This is because reflexive research draws explicit attention to the way personal, cultural, and structural properties interact and govern our day-to-day interactions and choices. Possessing an awareness of these interactions and how and why we make choices is at the heart of agency. Awareness makes way for choice-making and our ability to imagine doing things differently. Our approach to reflexive empathy offers a pragmatic solution to the debate in empathy studies around the effectiveness of empathic practice for social good because reflexive empathy has the capacity to support and foreground *agency* rather than altruism.

Professional learning conditions in a neoliberal world

Because this article is concerned with enabling teacher agency and the landscape of professional learning, we must interrogate the influence and landscape of neoliberalism in education. In Australia, a culture of accountability has had constraining effects on teacher professional identity with managerial discourse dominating the language of professional learning (see Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2018). The pressure of high-stakes external standardised testing regimes, school ranking systems, and the publication of related data has had a significant impact on teachers and their professional identities (Mockler, 2022a, 2022b). Education systems around the world from primary to tertiary contexts are increasingly reliant on quantifying teaching and learning processes to formulate arguments about educational progress and policy (Gulson, Sellar, & Webb, 2022; Holloway & Lewis, 2021). This impacts teacher agency directly because the quantification of these standards is often privileged over more complex ways of understanding the role of teachers and their unique impacts on students (Gulson et al., 2022; Mockler, 2011, 2022a, 2022b). These aspects of the educational landscape simultaneously impact professional learning and the culture that has developed around it. The terms 'professional development' (PD) and 'professional learning' (PL) historically have carried different meanings, with PD often denoting one-off or brief learning encounters for teachers with little understanding of prior knowledge possessed by the teachers involved (Mockler, 2022b; Wilson, Dutton, & Hitches, 2021). PL is more often associated with sustained professional engagement from teachers through the cultivation of new learning practices to support educational change. However, Wilson et al. (2021) highlight the terms have become somewhat interchangeable over the last two decades (p. 3). We use the term professional learning to demonstrate the fact that our engagement with teachers was focused on providing long-term support and education rather than delivering one-off or mandated 'PD-esque' programming.

In New South Wales, where part of this study was conducted, teachers are required to participate in a set number of 'professional development' hours dependent on their career status, across four 'priority areas' determined by the governing educational body in the state (NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA), 2023). Teachers must fulfil their hours through a blend of 'NESA Accredited' PD which addresses the priority areas

and 'Elective PD' which comprises 'activities completed in or outside your school/service' (NESA, 2023) and meets a series of requirements outlined by NESA. The context of external accreditation bodies and accountability measures involving PL are exemplary of CEPs and SEPs that may impact teacher attitudes towards PL. The question of teacher motivation and the sustained desire of teachers to engage in professional learning over the course of their careers may be undermined by such compliance mechanisms and arguably contributes to teachers feeling devalued as professionals (Manuel, Dutton, & Carter, 2019).

Recent work by Hogan and Lingard (2018) has pointed out the rise of commercialisation in Australian public education. Their study revealed that many teachers 'perceived that commercial resources were necessary for their day-to-day practice', especially in relation to being 'time poor' and filling gaps in knowledge (pp. 22–23). However, teachers involved in their study importantly pointed out the risks of commercialisation, including its potential to support 'hidden agendas' (p.23), and an over-reliance on static, pre-determined outcomes. Teachers involved in the study indicated feeling de-professionalised and lacking in agency due to the dominant position commercial education products occupy in Australian public schooling.

The rise of the digital marketplace in the twenty-first century has also had an impact on the way teachers access new learning materials and expand their knowledge of practice. While research has historically focused on in-person professional learning engagements, the internet's capacity to offer free, quick, and on-demand access to new learning materials for teachers complicates the landscape further. Time is a major constraint for teachers (see Ryan et al., 2021) which may impact their ability to engage with the sustained, active, and contextualised professional learning shown to be effective in improving practice (Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). With the constraint of time comes the necessity for quick and ready-made resources available on-demand. Research suggests that the quality of digital exchanges related to online professional learning varies, especially due to its informal nature as a social exchange or collaborative act rather than formal professional engagement (van Bommel, Randahl, Liljekvist, & Ruthven, 2020). Recently, Carpenter, Shelton, and Schroeder (2022) have identified the rise of the 'education influencer', defined as 'individuals who use social media platforms to gain large audiences of educator followers and monetize this attention' (pp. 749–750). Pinterest and Twitter are also popular sources for teachers to quickly access materials (Pittard, 2017; Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014). The website 'Teachers Pay Teachers' is particularly influential in the United States, where teachers publish lesson plans and curricular materials for other teachers to buy and use themselves (Pittard, 2017). Digital Educational Resources (DERs) thus play a unique role in the professional development landscape, as they offer self-directed, quick-fix solutions to teachers and often position themselves as being 'by the teacher for the teacher'. While such DERs may provide teachers with a space to voice their questions and concerns within a professional learning community, purchasable digital products cannot be separated from the neoliberal marketplace in which they have emerged.

In this study, we aimed to present an antidote to the contemporary landscape of professional learning by offering context and subject specific professional learning, informed by reflexive principles (see Appendix 1). We argue that the current status quo of professional learning dominated by neoliberalism does not allow for reflexive empathic

encounters to take place in meaningful ways that support teacher agency. This is because neoliberal approaches to professional learning do not allow the time or the sustained reflexive understanding that is required to design and offer empathically reflexive PL.

Context of the study

The professional learning provided was the subject of a large, federally funded study in Australia (with ethics approval from three universities and two education sectors). This article discusses the participation of three teachers from one school involved in the study. This school was in a metropolitan area and students who attended the school were relatively socio-economically advantaged. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and was impacted as a result. However, the three teachers discussed in this paper were comprehensively involved in the study from the end of 2019 until the end of 2021.

While this project had a complex purpose, one of its key motives was to engage the participant teachers in co-designed, evidence-based professional learning, unique to their context. Data were collected from each teacher's classroom, involving recorded videos of classroom teaching of writing, teacher and student interviews, student surveys, and student writing samples. Furthermore, data were collected during co-designed professional sessions including the production of action plans, and ongoing discussions with teachers about their feelings and perceptions of participating in the study. While we do not conduct analysis of data per se in this article, we show how data generation and co-design informed our professional learning program and its context.

The presence of de-contextualised 'solutions'

The school involved in this study initially relied on a commercial program. When asked by a member of the research team, 'What's the approach to writing at the school? Do you have a whole school program?', one of the participant teachers, Annie, replied, 'when I first started here, within the first three weeks of being at the school, I found out 7 steps to writing success program was a big thing'. She went on to describe how the school's writing culture had shifted recently, as the staff were trying to decide if the program they relied on 'worked' or not. She also articulated how the school was trying to 'juggle' –

> towards a more holistic approach of writing because we found that then they [the students] would only just remember sizzling starts! And then they just loved sizzling starts, and then you do a tightening tension, but how do I put that into a holistic piece of writing as well?

The ability of the commercial program to seamlessly enter the discourse of the teacher is evident in her discussion. The terminology of the program, 'sizzling starts', 'tightening tension', also appeared in the language of the children when they discussed their writing with the research team (see Ryan et al., 2023). The way this language creeps into the discourse of the writing classroom is beyond the scope of this article, but we note that its presence exemplifies the de-contextualised nature of commercial programs and their dominance in Australian schools. From the view of reflexivity, commercial programs are inherently decontextualised because they do not acknowledge the

interconnectedness of the structural, cultural, and personal emergent properties that shape the context of teachers, and rather offer solutions to partial aspects of the context such as the structural condition of the curriculum. The pre-packaged terminology is easily slipped into the writing practices of classrooms without any knowledge or understanding of the discourses of that specific school prior to the entry of the program. The school is, however, expected to be able to speak this new language, and to teach this language to students, while the commercial program has no epistemological responsibility in return. We argue that this one-sided language exchange is an example of how de-contextualised 'solutions' for writing PL lack capacity to practise reflexive empathy and therefore are not sustainable choices for supporting teacher agency.

Over the course of our involvement with the teachers who participated in this study we witnessed a variety of digital resources being used in the classroom to teach writing. Claudie, who taught Year 4, drew on 'Pobble', an online writing resource from the UK that provides pre-made lessons, tools, and resources for teachers of writing. Melissa, who taught Year 6, used 'Educeri', a 'lesson subscription service' and competitor to Teachers Pay Teachers (see Educeri, 2023). Educeri positions itself as being 'standards based' in comparison to TPT which markets itself as a digital example of a community of practice.

All of this is to say, the landscape of professional development for teachers is complex and requires an understanding of the SEPs, CEPs and PEPs that may enable and constrain their engagement with new approaches to the teaching of writing. While digital resources offer a solution to teachers' time constraints, and allow opportunity for international collaboration and solidarity, the SEP of neoliberalism complicates these pro-social pursuits. For researchers, acknowledging and understanding how these SEPs, CEPs and PEPs relate to teachers is crucial to supporting their simultaneous professional learning. For a reflexive empathic exchange to take place, reflexive properties must be understood and accounted for throughout the process of interaction. While digital programs and tools offer a multiplicity of positives for teaching writing, we feel it is important to point out the dominant nature of their discourse as an aspect of teachers' contexts. What we assert is that de-contextualised products that position themselves as 'solutions' to classroom problems like time, student engagement, or teacher knowledge, lack the capacity for empathy by default. This is because the resource/PL is not able to fully account for the contextual factors of the cultural and personal emergent conditions specific to the life and practice of the teacher and the student and respond to those contextual factors accordingly. This is because the package is pre-determined to meet broad market-demands. No pre-packaged program can possibly envisage the learning needs of every teacher and student it affects by virtue of its nature as a static, purchasable product. In the following section, we explain how our use of reflexivity in the design of a PL program for teaching writing afforded empathic exchange *because of* an acknowledgement and appreciation of context.

Empathic reflexivity as an epistemology of professional learning

Our design of professional learning was directly informed by the PEPs, CEPs and SEPs of the teacher and student participants. We understood the interconnectedness of personal, cultural, and structural emergent properties present for the participants through collecting and analysing data using the lens of reflexivity. Data collected included teacher and student interviews, recorded classroom observations, artefacts, and writing samples. We

then analysed the data to understand how writing was situated in the participants' personal, cultural, and structural realities. We coded references to our demonstration of personal conditions such as one's identity, worldview, knowledge, capabilities and desires (PEP); along with cultural conditions such as prevailing expectations, norms and ideologies (CEP); and structural phenomena such as everyday processes, resources and policies (SEP) that were evident. It became clear how all participants' writing practices were influenced by a complex interaction between PEP, SEP, and CEP. We found the recognition of this interplay integral to designing effective PL that supported teacher participants' professional growth as teachers of writing, rather than framing their involvement as subjects to be studied and analysed. We note that some key findings from this data have been analysed and presented in other publications (see Ryan et al., 2021, 2022, 2023; Khosronejad et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Weber, Barton, Ryan, & Khosronejad, 2023). Figure 1 shows the practice of our reflexive research cycle. We describe the stages of reflexive research informed by reflexive empathy in Table 1.

We argue that this contextualised approach to research-informed professional learning made way for reflexive empathy *because* it used reflexivity as its research framework. To design professional learning, we had to learn about the professional environment of the teachers involved. Once this information was exchanged through our research methodology, we assigned their contextual circumstances meaningful qualities through reflexivity to action a response. Rather than designing a 'top-down' intervention approach to
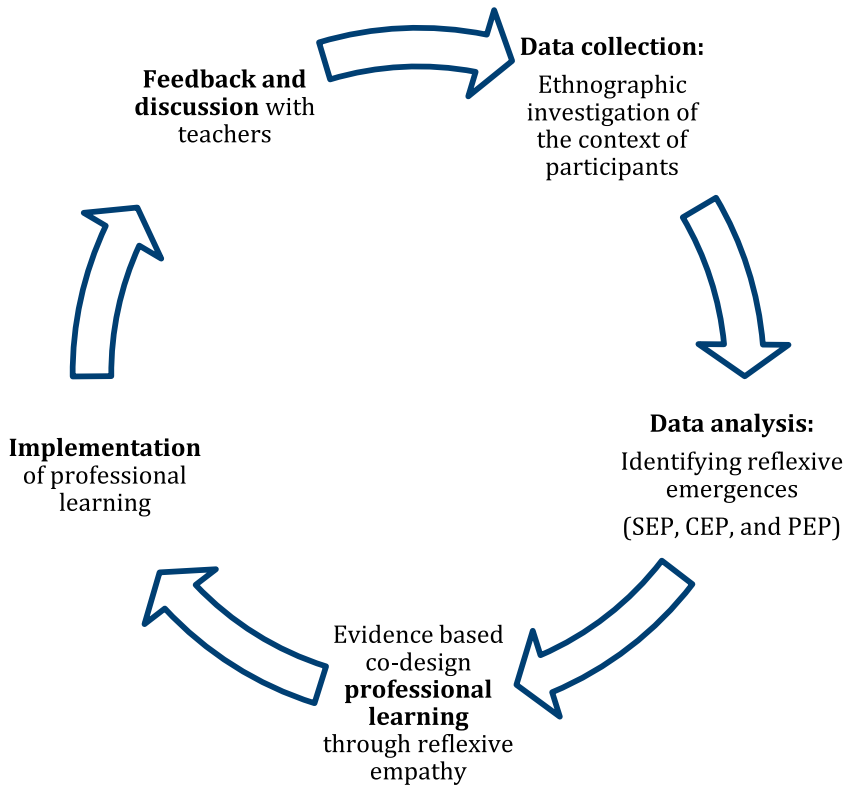

Figure 1. A research design cycle informed by reflexive empathy.

Table 1. Stages of reflexive research informed by reflexive empathy.

Stages of reflexive research	How different stages are informed by reflexive empathy
Data collection: Ethnographic investigation of the context of participants	Involves observation and empathic conversation with participants. The three emergent properties are used to improve participants' self-awareness about their context and encourage them to share their experiences with researchers. This self-awareness and the sharing experience are considered the first step towards reflexive empathy.
Data analysis: Identifying reflexive emergences (SEP, CEP, PEP)	Aims to answer questions about the sociocultural world of participants: What they experience as the enabling and constraining effects of the emergences. The second step of reflexive empathy includes understanding the experiences, thoughts, feelings, and actions of 'another'–teachers and students.
Evidence based co-design **professional learning** through reflexive empathy	Involves working alongside teachers to co-design learning experiences based on the findings. The findings help teachers to reflect on (1) themselves, (2) their contexts, and (3) their students. Reflexive empathy is achieved through participant-oriented conversations and empathic actions that serve the needs of teachers and students.
Implementation of professional learning Feedback and discussion with teachers	The last two steps are about classroom implementation and the empathic evaluation of co-designed learning experiences. Researchers practice empathy through engagement with teachers, students, and other potential stakeholders and exploring how the reflexive emergences appear to them post intervention.

professional learning, we let context and evidence lead us through the design and consultancy with teachers. This included the collaborative design of classroom activities, pedagogical strategies, and reflection tasks for the specific needs of the teachers and children in those precise classrooms, with their personal, cultural, and structural realities regarding writing as our guide. We have discussed in detail, the contents of some of our professional learning design elsewhere (see Ryan et al., 2023) but want to highlight here how a reflexive lens can support meaningful contributions to teacher professional learning by way of a deep acknowledgement and understanding of everyday strengths, difficulties, and circumstances that make up contemporary classrooms.

Conclusion

This article has proposed and defined the term reflexive empathy for the purposes of professional learning programs underpinned by studies involving researchers and teachers. We have argued how reflexive empathy can support professional learning design in the present by resisting neoliberal approaches that decontextualise teachers' work by not acknowledging the complex and multi-layered nature of teacher context shaped through the interplay of SEP, CEP, and PEP. Commercial professional learning products are, by default, pre-prepared programs without the capacity for reflexive empathy due to the inability to exchange contextualised knowledge. We argue that reflexive empathy may present a context-sensitive antidote to the overwhelming landscape of for-profit, silver-bullet packages that ignore the professional identity and expertise of the individual teacher. Furthermore, we argue that reflexive empathy is evidence-based because it relies on gathering contextual evidence to make professional decisions. It is our aim through this article to encourage professional learning studies through reflexivity and thus enable teachers to drive sustainable change in their classrooms.

Disclosure statement

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

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Appendix 1. Principles of reflexive writing