

Reflective Learning as a Tool for Professional Development in Teacher Education

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Abstract

The transformative vision of NEP 2020 in developing critical thinking, creativity, innovative pedagogies, and professional development of teachers is very closely aligned with the philosophy of reflective learning. Reflective learning involves the process of thinking and analysing one's own learning experience for continuous improvement in the future. Reflective learning moves beyond rote or procedural engagement, fostering an adaptive mindset that is responsive to dynamic classroom realities and diverse learner needs. It equips teachers with the ability to question their own pedagogical choices, integrate feedback constructively, and adapt to evolving educational contexts. Therefore, the objectives of this paper are: i) To explore the influence of reflective learning practices on critical thinking, self-awareness, and professional growth among pre-service teachers focussing on Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, and ii) To analyse the role of post-teaching reflection in developing reflective thinking and professional competencies in pre-service teacher education. It is qualitative research where the case study research design has been followed, and data has been collected qualitatively from 125 pre-service B.Ed students for in-depth analysis, for which written reflections, classroom discussions, and observational records have been analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings show that structured reflective learning has significantly enhanced critical self-examination, empathy, creativity, professional awareness, and life skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and resilience among the pre-service teachers. Aligned with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the study recommends that reflective learning should be an integral part of teacher education because it is vital pedagogical tool for cultivating reflective, adaptive, and professionally competent teachers.

Key words: Critical thinking, Creativity, Reflective learning, Professional development

Introduction

Teacher education plays a crucial role in fostering reflective capacity among future educators (Jones, 2024). Reflective practice is essential as it cultivates the ability to develop strategies and apply acquired knowledge to address complex and unpredictable situations encountered in everyday teaching (Harvey et al., 2016). Teacher education plays a crucial role in fostering reflective capacity among future educators (Jones, 2024). Reflective practice is essential as it cultivates the ability to develop strategies and apply acquired knowledge to address complex

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and unpredictable situations encountered in everyday teaching (Harvey et al., 2016). According to Jones (2024), reflective practice develops through three interconnected stages: thinking, learning to reflect, and becoming a reflective practitioner. The learning experiences during teaching practicum fosters reflective capacity by promoting collaboration, discussions, and observation of others' teaching (Ho, 2019a; Nichols et al., 2017). Such experiences help student teachers apply reflective insights in real classroom, improves self-awareness, empathy, and personal growth. Reflective practice is therefore closely tied to the emotional, instructional, and social dimensions of teaching, highlighting how environmental and interpersonal factors shape student teachers' emotional experiences and professional development (Arefian, 2022; Bleakley et al., 2020).

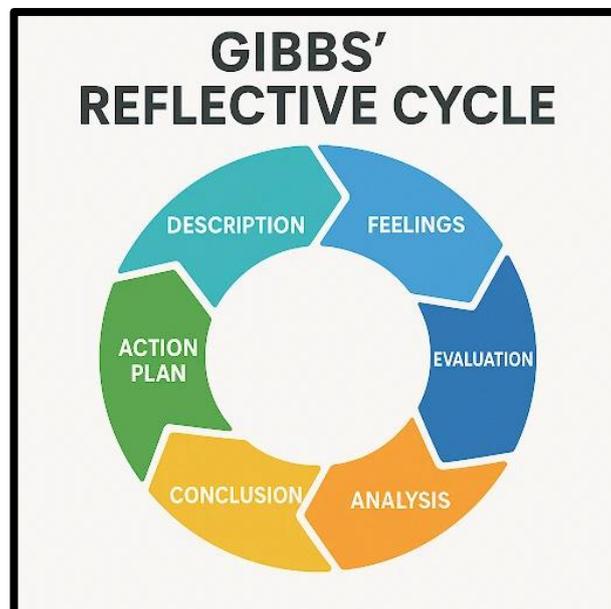
Teachers require continuous support and professional development to enhance the quality of their lesson planning and classroom teaching practices (Parra, 2010). Professional development serves as a critical component in fostering teachers' professional growth, as it provides structured opportunities for educators to refine their pedagogical knowledge, instructional strategies, and overall teaching effectiveness. The general purpose of such professional development initiatives is to improve teachers' classroom practices, strengthen their professional skills, and foster a deeper understanding of the learning process (Loizou, 2008; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). When teachers engage in professional development activities, they are encouraged to critically evaluate their teaching approaches, adapt to new educational paradigms, and respond more effectively to the diverse needs of their students. Professional development can take a variety of forms, including reflective journaling, peer observation, collaborative discussions with colleagues, and systematic analysis and evaluation of teaching practices (Farrell, 2008; Harmer, 2001). Each of these activities provides teachers with an avenue to explore their classroom experiences from different perspectives and to identify both the strengths and weaknesses in their teaching. For instance, keeping a reflective diary allows teachers to document their classroom experiences and systematically analyse their instructional decisions. Peer observation and collaboration enable educators to gain insights from colleagues, promoting a culture of shared learning and continuous improvement. These activities collectively encourage both pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in thoughtful reflection on their professional practices, thereby linking theoretical knowledge with practical application (Özsoy, 2020).

Reflective Learning

Schön (1983) defined reflective practice as a set of techniques that enhance the teaching performance of both pre-service and in-service teachers (Canning, 2011). It serves as a compass that “enables teachers to stop, look, and discover where they are at that moment and then decide where they want to go (professionally) in the future” (Farrell, 2012, p. 7). Killion and Todnem (1991) identified three types of reflective practice to improve teaching skills (Bubnys & Zavadskienė, 2017): reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action, or “thinking while doing,” occurs during teaching and enables teachers to adjust their methods based on student responses (Bubnys & Zavadskienė, 2017; Dinkelman, 2003). Reflection-on-action takes place after teaching, allowing educators to analyse their experiences to identify strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement (Killion & Todnem, 1991). Reflection-for-action focuses on using insights from prior reflections to plan and

enhance future lessons (Bubnys & Zavadskienė, 2017). Together, these three forms create a continuous cycle of learning that promotes self-awareness, professional growth, and improved teaching competence.

In 1988, Graham Gibbs developed the Gibbs Reflective Cycle, a six-stage model that helps individuals learn systematically from their experiences, whether positive or negative. The model promotes continuous personal and professional growth by turning reflection into actionable learning. Its six stages—Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan—guide learners through recounting events, examining emotions, evaluating outcomes, analysing causes, drawing conclusions, and planning future improvements. Gibbs' model is now widely used across disciplines such as teaching, healthcare, social work, and business. Its structured and practical approach encourages self-awareness, critical thinking, and the integration of theory with practice, making reflection a key tool for lifelong learning and professional development.



Source: <https://www.indiaassignmenthelp.com/blog/understanding-gibbs-reflective-cycle-a-simple-guide-for-students>

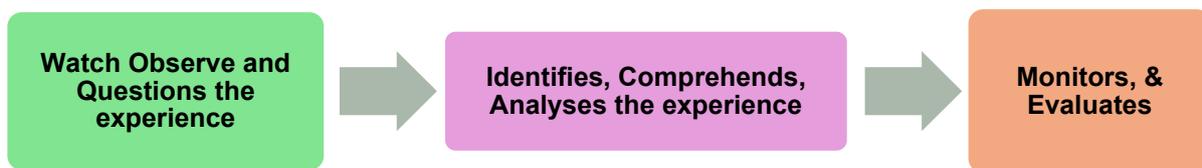
Despite extensive literature on reflective practice, empirical classroom-based evidence linking structured reflective activities to measurable professional competencies among Indian pre-service teachers remains limited.

Scaffolding Reflective Learning

Reflective thinking and learning need to be consciously and deliberately practiced through continuous observation, questioning, and analysis of one's own experiences. By watching and examining personal experiences, individuals gain deeper insights into the nature of problems and the contexts in which they occur. This process not only enhances one's understanding of specific situations but also fosters greater awareness of the perspectives and emotions of others, thereby cultivating empathy. Questioning one's experiences further strengthens the reflective process by encouraging individuals to critically assess their actions, thoughts, and decisions. This type of inquiry helps identify underlying assumptions, biases, and patterns of behaviour,

leading to more thoughtful and informed responses in future situations. As a result, reflective thinking promotes a higher quality of understanding, improved critical thinking skills, and more effective decision-making. Moreover, engaging in reflective learning builds self-confidence, as individuals become more capable of evaluating their own strengths and areas for growth. It equips them with the ability to adapt to new challenges, make sound judgments, and continuously refine their personal and professional practices. Ultimately, reflective thinking transforms experiences into meaningful learning opportunities, fostering both emotional intelligence and lifelong growth. The relevance of scaffolding of reflective thought process needs to be clearly comprehended for better outcomes (Fig 1.)

Fig 1. Sequential flow of thought process during reflective practise- scaffolding of reflection



Review of Related Literature

John Dewey, regarded as the father of educational philosophy, advocated pragmatism, emphasizing that learning occurs through experience, interaction, and experimentation. Central to Dewey's philosophy are the principles of utility, interest, experience, and integration. Learners' experiences form the foundation for deeper thinking and personal growth; by critically analyzing and reflecting on these experiences, students transform everyday events into meaningful learning opportunities. Structured reflection, often framed as the reflective learning cycle, guides learners to observe, evaluate, and draw conclusions, fostering self-awareness, autonomy, and continuous improvement. For teachers, reflection enables critical examination of teaching behaviours, beliefs, and assumptions, leading to more intentional and informed instructional decisions (Bubnys & Zavadskienė, 2017; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). Deliberate reflection helps teachers interpret their experiences, recognize the implications of their choices, and identify areas for improvement, encouraging a problem-solving mindset and viewing classroom challenges as growth opportunities (Amobi, 2005; Murray, 2010). Systematic reflection enhances professional learning by allowing educators to question practices critically and make data-informed decisions for sustained improvement (Brown, 2002). By integrating reflective practice into professional development, teachers become active agents of their own learning, continually evolving pedagogical approaches to meet the changing demands of education. Sustained engagement in reflective practice cultivates lifelong learning, equipping teachers with the critical thinking, adaptability, and professional confidence needed in modern classrooms. As a result, professional development grounded in reflective practice does not simply enhance individual teaching performance—it contributes to the broader goal of improving educational quality and student outcomes.

The transformative vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the holistic development of learners and teachers, promoting critical thinking, creativity, innovative pedagogies, and the continuous professional development of educators. This vision is closely

aligned with the philosophy of reflective learning, which promotes an active process of self-examination and critical analysis of one's learning and teaching experiences. Reflective learning encourages individuals to think deeply about their practices, evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies, and make informed decisions that lead to ongoing professional and personal growth. It moves beyond rote or procedural engagement, fostering an adaptive mindset that is responsive to dynamic classroom realities and diverse learner needs. Practicing reflective learning is recognized as one of the core competencies in teacher professional standards globally. It equips teachers with the ability to question their own pedagogical choices, integrate feedback constructively, and adapt to evolving educational contexts. In the framework of NEP 2020, this competency becomes particularly vital, as the policy envisions teachers not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators, mentors, and co-learners who engage in continuous self-improvement. Reflective learning, therefore, underpins the policy's aspiration to cultivate a generation of educators who are intellectually autonomous, ethically grounded, and capable of nurturing critical and creative learners. Globally, UNESCO and other international organizations emphasize reflective practice as central to teacher professionalism and lifelong learning. Reflective learning fosters higher-order thinking, professional autonomy, and sustained innovation. By encouraging both pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in reflective inquiry, UNESCO promotes continuous learning that extends beyond formal training, enhancing teaching effectiveness and supporting quality education and sustainable professional development. In essence, both NEP 2020 and global educational frameworks converge on the idea that reflection is central to transformative education. When teachers engage in reflective learning, they become agents of change—capable of re-evaluating their pedagogical approaches, responding thoughtfully to learners' needs, and fostering environments that value inquiry, innovation, and inclusivity. Through this synergy between policy and practice, reflective learning emerges as a foundational pillar in shaping the future of teacher education and in realizing the broader objectives of educational reform.

Objectives of the Study

- i) To explore the influence of reflective learning practices on critical thinking, self-awareness, and professional growth among pre-service teachers and
- ii) To analyse the role of scaffolding reflection through Gibbs' Reflective Cycle in developing reflective thinking and professional competencies in pre-service teacher education.

Methodology

Method: Qualitative, exploratory case study approach has been adopted for the present study to examine the effectiveness of reflective learning practices in a pre-service teacher education programme.

Sample and Sampling Technique: The participants included 125 pre-service student teachers (B.Ed) from NERIE, NCERT, Shillong, selected through purposive sampling.

Tools for Data collection: Qualitative data has been collected through students' written reflections, oral discussions, and classroom observations. Group interviews and content analysis of the reflective journals were also used for data collection.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, with emerging themes mapped onto the stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle to interpret the effectiveness of structured reflection in promoting critical thinking, self-awareness, and professional learning. Besides, post teaching reflection has been used to map the gradual professional development of the trainee teachers.

To explore reflective learning, two activities were conducted in the pre-service teacher education classroom. Students responded to guiding questions that prompted critical reflection on their actions, decisions, and emotional responses during teaching tasks. Follow-up group discussions enabled them to share perspectives, compare experiences, and collaboratively deepen their understanding. This structured approach fostered higher-order thinking, enhanced reflective skills, and promoted professional dialogue and community learning among pre-service teachers. Ultimately, the activities aimed to cultivate reflective habits that would contribute to their long-term growth as thoughtful, adaptive, and self-aware educators. The trainees were asked the following questions which gives them the scope to reflect on the characteristics of their favourite teachers and what are the factors that really influences them to remembers their teachers of their school days-

Questions:

- a. Which teacher you like the most in your school days?
- b. Why do you like? Note down the reasons.
- c. What are the qualities which influenced you or admired you? Note down.
- d. Individually present/ share it with the whole class
- e. Write the specific qualities on the blackboard

Observations:

The core specific qualities enlisted by the students about their teachers whom they admire were caring, knowledgeable, approachable, Joyful, effective transaction, interesting way of content delivery, systematic, empathetic, individual attention, entertaining classes, motivating, provides career information, good in drawings and illustrating, good explanation skills, discussing personal issues of children when they need help, friendly, encouraging, etc. The activity details with outcomes are given in **table 1**.

Table 1. Relation between the activity outcomes and Gibb's reflective cycle

Steps	Activity	Time	Key Instructions	Outcomes	Gibbs Reflective Cycle
1	Question session	5 min	Explain purpose and context of the questions	Student understands the question and starts thinking with an open mind	Description

2	Individual Reflection	4-5 min	Think about your experience with your favourite teacher of schools	starts thinking experiences closely and mentally	Feelings
3	Noting their reflections in their note books	5min	Share reflections, give feedback.	Gain perspectives and deeper understanding of the content and record insights.	Analysis
4	Presenting individually -Whole Class Sharing	20 min	Volunteers share; teacher links to core quality	Collective understanding of the shared experiences on the core content, monitors and evaluates it	Evaluation
5	Writing the specific qualities on the black board	15 min	Note the specific quality which influenced you	Students finalize the specific core qualities on the black board	Conclusion
6	Discussion	5-10 min	Develop personal plan for future teaching.	Students understand objectives and importance of reflection. Apply insights; continuous improvement.	Action Plan

Learning Outcomes: The learner

- recollects their experiences in the school
- watches and observes their thoughts related to their experiences
- reflects on the feelings their own school experiences
- analyses the experience with deeper understating
- monitors and evaluates the core content within the experience

The trainee teachers prepare 30 lesson plans and they are asked to reflect based on the following questions after taking each class –

Post-Teaching Reflection	
Q.1.	What was done in the class?
Q.2.	What did I learn?
Q.3.	How satisfied am I?
Q.4.	What made me happy or sad about the lesson?

Q.5.	What were my strengths or drawbacks?	
Q.6.	Have I improved?	
Q.7.	Any other introspection?	

While analysing the answer of the questions, it has been found that the reflection on the part of the trainee teachers is not reflected satisfactorily in all the answers. Some of them opined that sometimes they feel it monotonous to write same answers to all the questioned repeatedly after every learning design. Though most of the trainee teachers admitted that it helped them as they can check their progress and understand the learners as well as if any modification is necessary in the teaching-learning process to make it more effective.

Result and Discussions

First Objective: Reflecting on one’s school experiences, on a common and meaningful areas like; Which teacher did you like the most, and why? invites individuals to recall the educators who left a lasting impact on their learning and personal development. Thinking about the reasons behind this preference helps in identifying the qualities of the teacher and the way of teaching. For instance, some teachers may be admired for their ability to explain complex concepts in simple and engaging ways, while others are remembered for their patience, encouragement, or genuine care for students’ well-being. The qualities that stand out like enthusiasm, empathy, approachability, and fairness often shape the students’ perception of what effective teaching looks like. These admired attributes may have influenced not only the students’ academic performance but also their attitudes toward learning, critical thinking, and personal growth. By recalling and analysing these experiences, individuals gain insight into the factors that motivate, inspire, and engage learners. Such reflection also underscores the broader role of teachers as role models whose actions, attitudes, and interactions can leave a profound and lasting impact on the students’ intellectual and emotional development. Ultimately, reflecting on the teachers we admire allows us to understand what constitutes effective and inspiring teaching, highlighting the qualities that can be emulated by future educators to foster meaningful and transformative learning experiences. Identifying, comprehending and analysing the thoughts on their own experiences will help in developing increasing creative imagination to come up with better planning, critically analyzing the situations with integrity. It also helps in developing unconditional and nonjudgmental decisions while approaching a situation. Monitoring, evaluating and regulation help in understanding the thinking strategies and thus becomes more aware of the consequences. These thought processing strategies not only helps in evaluation but also to regulate the plan in a skilful way. Inflect reflective learning helps in inculcating several life skills among the students (Table 2),

Table 2. Reflective practices, Professional development and Life skills associated

S. No.	PROCESS OF REFLECTION (on your own experience)	Professional development qualities	Life skills
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1.	Watching Observing Questioning	Self confidence Empathy Care and concern	Self-awareness
2.	Identifying Comprehending Analyzing	Creativity Honesty Unconditional Team work	Problem solving Decision making
3.	Monitoring Evaluating	Tolerance Open mindedness Resilience	Critical Thinking

Second Objective: Post-teaching reflection has been structured in such a way that the trainee teachers get in depth qualitative way of expressing reflection. They can understand what is done in the class at a glance, what did they learn, what are the things that appealed to the school students, what went wrong, what are the areas that needs improvement, what are the strength and drawbacks that they need to focus, is there gradual improvement. After analysing the post teaching reflections of the trainee. Thus, post teaching reflection gave the scope for reflection not only for teachers but also the students’ point-of-view are taken into consideration. The teacher’s professional growth and development, his/ her day to day teaching-learning process in the class, his/her satisfaction, strength and drawbacks, gradual improvement, scope for other introspection led to have a clear reflection of all dimensions of professional development.

Major Findings

Finding related to the first objective:

- i) The reflective practices done through identifying and reflecting on the qualities of the teachers has made the trainee teachers realize that it is the professional skills like- empathy, open-mindedness, care and concern, creativity, honesty, unconditional service, tolerance, resilience which make a teacher really effective whom the students can remember throughout their lives.
- ii) Reflective activity also helps them to develop like skills like- critical thinking, self-awareness, problem-solving, decision making, etc.

Findings related to the second objective:

- i) Post teaching reflection helps the trainee teacher to systematically monitor and document their gradual development as professionals because they can understand their strength, weakness, what worked well, how the same strategy may be effective or may not be depending on the level of students.
- ii) Reflective practices turn the mistakes into learning experiences.

- iii) Orientation regarding how to implement reflective learning plays significant role in using effective the reflective practices for the professional development.

Recommendations

Reflective learning is very important among teachers since it has an important and effective role in developing their own self as better thinkers with unconditional approach and can thereby become quality teachers. For the effective development of met cognition among the teachers' certain pedagogical practices like self-talk, reflective thinking, reciprocal teaching, etc. that should be an integral part of the teacher education curriculum and need to be practiced during the in-service classroom transactions. Some of the recommendations to be incorporated in the TE curriculum for the professional development of teachers are as follows:

1. Reflective learning should be an integral part of teaching learning curriculum and need to be implemented effectively by the teacher educators.
2. Maintenance of records may not be practical for every reflective practice but it can be shared as a discussion or presentation mode in the classrooms.
3. Digital tools can be used for according the reflections to save the time. Scaffolding of reflection needs to be done by focusing not only on what but also on why and how.
4. Reflective learning practices need to be implemented through the semesters in the areas like class management micro teaching school culture professional development etc by the teacher educators.
5. In service training on reflective learning practices should be given for improving the quality of teaching and learning.
6. Continuous practice of reflective learning will help in inculcating reflective thinking in all their day today activities which in turn may integrate to their behaviour and help them in taking right decisions in different situations in their life

Conclusion

Reflective learning enhances self-directed growth, leading to professional development, improved teaching quality, and lifelong learning. It provides a foundation for professional development by improving self-awareness and helping individuals critically examine their experiences to enhance the quality of their work. Reflective learning also supports the development of essential 21st-century skills among students, such as problem-solving, adaptability, critical thinking, and self-awareness. Effective reflective practice promotes self-examination, enabling the acquisition of new professional development skills, both formal and informal. It fosters continuous improvement and helps pre-service teachers become competent and reflective educators.

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