

What Makes Teachers Reflective Practitioners? Findings from Remote Schools in

Pakistan

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Abstract

Reflective practice is considered a key element of teacher learning. The teaching and learning process are considered incomplete without reflective practice. Therefore, teachers are seen as reflective practitioners and researchers. This paper emerges from a qualitative study carried out in private sector schools in remote Pakistan. We collected data from ten teachers in two private schools through interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. Data analysis was carried out through qualitative methods. Findings showed that teachers regarded reflections and reflective practice very high for their learning as teachers. Teachers used different approaches for reflective practice including reflective journals, students test results, peer observations, and feedback from parents and communities. Findings have important implications for teaching and learning.

Keywords: Reflection, Reflective Practice, Reflective Practitioner, Teacher Learning

Introduction

Reflection is a process of in-depth thinking on our actions aiming for learning and improvements in the activities. Teaching rests on the bedrock of transformative processes and approaches. Without a teacher, teaching is always incomplete. Teachers play a vital role in society including reformers, guides, mentors, and leaders in the society. As a result, they tend to be in a continuous reflection. They need to reflect on their practices and decisions to make them effective and productive. Therefore, teachers always aim to become reflective practitioners and ensure their professional growth and development (Griffiths, 2000). They can improve their effectiveness in teaching and learning by attaining a clear understanding of their teaching and practice; and in doing so, they need to be reflective practitioners (Ferraro, 2000).

Through reflections, teachers change their teaching methodology, assessment technique, behaviors, activities, and practices. Schon (1983) presents 'reflection in action and reflection on action' which teachers generally carry out consciously or unconsciously. Such reflections help to promote and enhance teaching and learning practices. Reflection in action is about the process of reflection during teaching; whereas, reflection on action refers to a reflection upon the completing teaching (Schon1983).

The main purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and practices of elementary school teachers in their becoming reflective practitioners in a remote region of Pakistan. By exploring the ways and practices of teachers in their practicing reflections, the study has put forth huge implications for practicing teachers. In other words, reflection is seen as instrumental to effective teaching and learning; therefore, it is vital to identify the importance, perceptions, and practices of reflection in teaching and how do teachers perceive and practice them. This study, therefore, highlights the key and innovative ways of reflection that teachers carry out in the remote schools in Pakistan.

Review of literature

Reflection is about the process of in-depth thinking about courses of action (Clark, 2009). Reflection is seen as a mental process used by individuals to achieve and accomplish goals and objectives. Teachers and learners apply this strategy to make sense of concepts and unstructured ideas and patterns of work. In other words, reflection is about the process of transforming our knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, and actions (Moon, 2005).

Reflection becomes a tool to translate experiences into knowledge (Korthagen, 2001). Human beings learn from their experiences based on reflections on actions. Reflections give opportunities to

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make take decisions based on concrete evidence. The reflective practice engages teachers in a problem-solving activity; as a result, strengthening their competencies (Day, 1993).

Reflective teaching has its basis on reflective practice. Thus, reflective teaching enables teachers to go beyond the classroom boundaries and enables them to take viable decisions (Bennett, 1995). Through reflective teaching teachers and learners engage in the process of deep thinking, analyzing, making decisions based on the reflections on their teaching process. Through reflections, teachers can reflect on activities, beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes and streamline them accordingly. Through reflective teaching teachers make the lessons and concepts understandable for the learners (Biggs, 2011).

As reflective practitioners, teachers become involved in think and rethinking processes based on factual information and observations. The process helps to bring about improvements in their teaching (Farrell, 2007). It is a continuous process where teachers become part of an inquiry process to ensure quality in their teaching (Loughran, 2013). This process provides a base for continuous learning for teachers. Reflective practice is a challenging and demanding process to get a greater level of awareness about one's practices and thus it is considered as a key element of educational change (Fullan, 1991; Elliot, 1991). In other words, it helps teachers to improve professional practices (Shon, 1983).

Reflection practice showcases an important role in teaching and learning making them more effective and learning-oriented. Through reflection, teachers become lifelong learners (Hursen, 2014). They can develop a repertoire of knowledge and skills through reflective practices (Bulter, 1996). Reflection also enables teachers to know about problems faced by their students and to develop ways to address them. The inquiry skills developed through reflective practice make teachers life-long learners (Adeyemi, 1996). The process helps teachers to make sense of what they do and how should they do something.

Reflection enables teachers to develop their espouse theories based on thinking and looking for an alternative course of actions and decisions. According to Schon (1983), reflection becomes instrumental to developing theories by teachers as per their work. Reflection makes teachers critical thinkers giving them a profound understanding of their work (Garrison, 1991). Besides, the process helps teachers to become conscious professionals in their field (Osterman, 1990). In this way, teachers develop their level of self-awareness and thus is considered an important element of teacher training (Wallace, 1991).

Without continuous reflection, teachers may not become change agents (Valli, 1992). Teachers are seen as change agents in society. However, without advocating and practicing reflection, teachers may not be seen as real change agents.

How do teachers reflect?

As highlighted earlier, reflection is a basic requirement for teachers to become reflective practitioners, change agents, and researchers. The first step of a reflective process is to collect and generate data and valid information about one's classrooms, students, and subsequent circumstances (Moon, 2013). For this purpose, teachers use a variety of methods and approaches in their workplace. Key supportive elements reflections are given below.

A reflective journal is one of the important tools to improve teaching practice. Through this tool, teachers identify their weak areas and strengths after deeply reflections on practices (Bayat, 2010). Teachers record both positive and negative feedback on their activities regarding professional and academic life. By maintaining reflective diaries or journals teachers continuously improve their teaching practice and also teachers become able to create and provide effective learning for the learners.

Teachers also use students' feedback for reflection. Students are the actual observers of the teachers. They deeply observe the teacher practices within the class and school. Teachers can get authentic feedback and perspectives from the students regarding their practice and teaching. For this purpose teachers give the chance to the students to express their feelings, emotions, and perceptions regarding teaching and learning processes.

Video recording of lessons is also one of the valuable sources to practice reflection in routine teaching. Audio and Video recording of teaching provide unaltered and unbiased data about weaknesses and improvement needed areas of teaching and teach (Motter, 2008). Through video and audio recording, teachers evaluate their teaching and based on valid reasons they bring about changes

in their practices. Thus audio and video recording are also important sources of reflection and self-assessment.

Likewise, peer observation is a common way to use in reflective practice. In peer observation context, teachers invite colleagues to their classes to observe teaching and share their observations. The observers observe classes critically and record the areas where the teacher needs further improvement and also inform the teachers about their best practices. As a result of the given feedback of colleague teachers, the concerned teachers plan to improve their practice through adopting various strategies (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Student assessment is another important area providing the basis for reflections. Assessment-centered teaching enables teachers to gain information and knowledge about students' understanding and teaching practice (Liu, 2010). Through assessment teachers just not only assess the student performance, but also gain and use new information and strategy to adjust teaching according to students' nature and learning environment.

Research Design

We employed a qualitative research approach for the study. In a qualitative approach researchers generally use interpretive data such as open and semi-structured interviews, personal experiences, observations, life stories, and document analysis to develop an understanding of phenomena under study. Qualitative researchers interpret phenomena in their natural setting (Merriam, 1998). A qualitative approach is commonly used in educational research as it focuses on the interpretation of things, phenomena, and concepts in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln 1994).

The qualitative approach enabled us to carry out an in-depth analysis of data. It enabled us to explore an in-depth understanding of reflection and reflective practices carried out by teachers in the schools. The qualitative approach became instrumental to collect data and develop an understanding of basic reasons, opinions, perceptions, beliefs, practices, and facts.

We used the purposive sampling technique for the study. It is carried out by keeping a view of the nature and objectives of the study. It is a common and frequently used sampling method in which researchers select samples as per the requirement of set criteria. In this case, we selected all those individuals who were involved in a reflective process in one way or the other. As a result, we selected 10 teachers (six men and four women) elementary teachers from two private schools of district Skardu as a sample for this research work. The experience of the teachers ranged from four years to twelve years. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews of five teachers from each of the two schools to collect data related to our study. We also used non-participatory observation for data collection. In doing so, we also observed the class lessons to gather data in the respective schools.

We strictly followed the research ethics. In this research work, we shared with the school management and teachers an information sheet about the research. We received formal approval to carry out the research work in the schools. Participation in the research was voluntary. Teachers voluntarily participated in the study. Names of the schools, principals, and teachers (research participants) were kept confidential and the data were not shared with anyone else. Pseudonyms were used in place of the real names of the participants. Data were kept in lockers where others could not access.

Findings

Teachers' Perceptions about Reflective Practice

The research participants perceived that reflection plays a vital role in education and their professional learning and growth. They highlighted that through reflections they come to know about their actions, activities, strengths, weaknesses, and about their students. The following are extracts from the interviews.

- "Reflection is a lifelong process enabling teachers to know the strengths and weaknesses of their practices and to improve them accordingly".
- "What I believe is that in the absence of reflective teaching and learning process become incomplete".
- "A reflective practice is a continuous process for teachers to address the shortcomings to ensure quality learning in the classrooms".
- "Through reflective practice teachers become aware of their actions and students. Teachers can explore problems and look for a way to address them."

- “Reflection is a process through which teachers assess the learning and develop remedial actions accordingly”.
- "Reflection is a mental process in which teachers deeply think and reflect on his/her practice and try to follow new plane and strategies based on findings to achieved expected goals and enhance students learning."

It surfaced from the analysis that reflection is the name of self-assessment. Through continuous reflection, teachers bring changes and improvements in teaching practice. During teaching practice, a teacher faces many challenges and problems. A teacher diagnoses the problems and challenges through self-assessment or self-reflection. When the teachers come to know about the nature of challenges and problems, they make new strategies and plans to overcome those challenges and problems.

We also analyzed the benefits and importance of reflections seen by the teachers.

- “Through reflections, I diagnose and come to know about the nature of the problems and challenges and thus I become able to improve my teaching”.
- "By continuous reflection, on the teaching practices, I learn and grow as a teacher".
- “Reflection helps me to improve quality and to enhance students learning because through reflection I can build conducive learning environments from my students”.
- “Reflection is a tool of assessment which is used by the teachers to make teaching practice more effective and productive.”
- “What I believe is, a teaching process is always incomplete in the absence of reflection. Reflection is a kind of mirror which shows progress and weaknesses of students and teachers.”
- “I mostly reflect during the teaching and bring about changes in my teaching according to the needs.”

It surfaced from the above extracts that mostly, teachers use reflection as a tool to make their teaching more comprehensive, productive, and understandable to the learners. Through reflections, teachers make sense of their strengths as well as the areas for improvement.

During lesson observations, we also found that during teaching teachers note down points on their lesson plans and after the lesson reflect on them. For instance, in one of the lessons the teacher noted down on the lesson plan as "in this lesson students generally felt bore in and did not participate enthusiastically". Later on, during the post-lesson observation meeting the teacher reflected on the concern and reflected and said that "due to continuing lecturing without involving the students in hands-on-minds-on activities, the students seemed to be passive". The teacher further reflected, "I have seen that whenever I involve the students in small group activities, I see an active participation in the classroom". Thus, it can be concluded that reflection plays a key role in the teaching-learning process. It enables teachers to make teaching and learning effective and conducive through knowing about their strengths, weaknesses, and contextual realities.

Strategies of Reflective Practice

Analysis of the data showed that teachers used different techniques or strategies for reflection.

Reflective Journals

Maintaining reflective journals was one of the key elements of reflective practice. We found that generally, the journals involve a brief description of a lesson or any concerning issues, encouraging points, and areas for improvement. Some of the journals also highlighted future concerns/decisions in case of teaching the same lesson again. Some of the extracts from the interviews are as under:

- "Maintaining a reflective diary is very important for me. In the diary, I reflect on my teaching every day. I consider it very important for my professional learning”.
- "Through reflecting on my day-to-day activities in the journal, I try to evaluate my teaching. I look for evidence of improvements, issues, and their remedies".
- "I learned maintaining the journal from one of my senior colleagues. She encouraged me to do so. Now, I feel something missing whenever I forget to maintain my reflective journals. This is how I learn as a teacher"
- “Reflection is key for my learning and development. I urge all other teachers to maintain it”.
- “Given the time constraints, I cannot write on each of the lessons, yet I maintain one reflection for the whole day sessions.”

To conclude, maintaining reflective journals is a key component of teachers' reflections. After reflecting on the teaching and learning process, teachers tend to change the approaches of the teaching process to bring about improvements in the students' learning.

Students test results and informal talks

Teachers mostly assess students' performance through daily, weekly, and monthly tests. After getting assessment results teachers to analyze the results which helps them to gauge progress. They use the test result analysis for their reflections. The following are some common extracts from the interviews and reflective journals:

- "Analysis of the students' assessment or results is one of the key sources that show the performance, achievements, and weaknesses of my students."
- "Reflection is necessary for us, I use the analysis of the students' test results for my reflections."
- "Informal discussions with my students outside the class helps me a great deal to reflect on the students' learning and to know about my students."
- "For my reflections, students' feedback and test results play a vital role. I can look for new strategies and approaches to make my lesson more effective based on the reflections on the students' feedback and their test results."
- "I get anonymous feedback from my students after completion of every unit. I give time to my students to write about the strengths and weaknesses in my teaching. this helps me to improve the teaching"

After analyzing students' test results and getting their feedback through formal and informal ways, teachers reflect on their practices and try to overcome weaknesses where necessary. In this way, teachers reflect on their practices and learning process. In other words, through the student feedbacks, teachers assess themselves to bring improvement in their work.

Peer Observation and feedback

Observation of lessons by colleague teachers has also emerged as an element to make facilitate teachers' reflections. We found that teachers used a standard (prescribed) observation sheet for this purpose. During teaching, a colleague sits in the back of the class and observes the teaching and learning. A predefined classroom observation checklist is used for this purpose. The observer fills the observation checklist attentively and intentionally focusing the lecture. The observers write down all areas where further improvement is needed. After completing the lesson the observers share their observations with the concerned teachers. They identify the strengths as well as weaknesses and the areas where further improvement is needed. The following are some key and common extracts from the interviews and diaries.

- "Mostly I reflect on teaching practices based on observation feedback by my colleague."
- "Though we do not have scheduled time for the peer observations, yet at least once in a month I and one of my colleagues observe each other classes and share the observation notes."
- "My reflection on the peer observation shows that the peer observation works well when both the teachers feel comfortable with each other. It also needs additional skills to observe classes and record feedback."

To conclude, teachers come to know about their practices and thus try to change their teaching styles and approaches as per the reflections on the observations. However, it also surfaced that teachers require skills to be able to carry out peer observations.

Feedbacks from parents and communities

The element of feedback from parents and communities emerged as a key element from this study. It was found that data from Parent-Teacher meetings, informal discussions with parents and communities, and community leaders (from religious and cultural gatherings) were used for reflection.

- "We conduct parent-teacher meetings on a scheduled basis. Such meetings give us opportunities to know about the background of our students and thus provide valid data for reflections."
- "Informal discussions with parents and community members in various gatherings such as mosques, market and in various ceremonies, also help me a great deal to reflect on my practices as a teacher."
- "Communities are key to help us as teachers to reflect on our work. Thus, remaining with them in close coordination helps us to reflect and grow. Their feedback, whether formal or

informal, helps us think for alternative approaches of teaching and learning and to redefine our role as teachers”.

To conclude, unlike the rest of the studies conducted across the world about teachers' reflections, the findings of this study have highlighted the role of parents and communities in facilitating and providing data for teachers' reflections. Teachers are part of society and their interaction with the parents and people from different walks of life provides those basic data for reflections.

Importance of reflective practice

Different aspects of the importance of reflection surfaced from the analysis of the findings. Some key extracts from the interviews and reflective journals are given below.

- "Reflection is part and parcel of a teacher's work. Without reflection, I cannot consider myself as a teacher."
- "Reflection enables me to know about my students' progress and develop strategies accordingly. It helps me know about the individual differences of my students"
- "Reflection helps me question my role, that is, do I do the things that I meant to do as a teacher."
- "The important role of reflection is to locate my work within the vision and mission of my school. I always think that whether or not I play my roles as per the vision of the school."
- "Reflection makes me think about the context and communities where our school is located. It helps me think about the communities and work accordingly"
- "Through reflections, I think about the norms and values of the culture where we work."

To conclude, it surfaced that teachers valued the reflections from various perspectives within and outside the schools. Their reflections generally revolve around the progress of their students, improvement in their practices, overall school context, vision and mission of the schools, and the community at large. Reflections help the teachers to base their practices as per the vision of the schools, norms, and values of the society and the communities where they work.

Discussion of Findings

As discussed in the section on findings, teachers regarded reflection and reflective practice very high in making the teaching and learning process effective and productive. Findings showed that teachers knew the significance of reflective practice in the teaching and learning process. The participants' views about reflection and reflective practices and their importance in teaching and learning is similar to together researchers view (Moon, 2013). Analysis showed that reflection helps the teachers to know about their student's progress, their strengths and weakness, and areas for improvement (Osterman, 1990). In other words, reflection became instrumental in their learning to teach and making sense of their routine practices as teachers (Brown & McIntyre, 1993)

These findings reiterate and reinforce findings of earlier studies such as reflection triggers deep thinking on practices to achieve expected goals and objectives (Clark, 2009). The findings also reinforce earlier studies about teachers' reflections during the lessons and after the lessons, which are called reflection in action and reflection on action respectively (Schon, 1983).

It surfaced that reflection is helpful for the teachers to develop their skills, knowledge, and expertise to provide an effective learning environment for the learners. Through reflection, the teacher will be aware of his/her weaknesses and improvement areas (Newell, 1996). According to Adeyemi (1996), reflective teaching becomes instrumental to develop the inquiry skills of the teachers.

The findings showed that without reflection teaching and learning are seen as incomplete and ineffective. The participants said that reflection is the source of getting new information and knowledge about their practices to bring about changes in their practices (Fullan, 1991). In this way, teachers become lifelong learners (Butler, 1996).

Reflective journals, peer observation, students' test results and informal talks with them, and feedback from parents and community members have emerged as providing a base for reflective practice for the teachers. Though, all such elements have been highlighted by earlier researchers (Moon, 2013; Richards & Lockhart, 1994); however, the component of 'feedback from parents and communities' seems to an emerging element from this study, which has not yet been documented in other studies.

It also surfaced that though teachers face challenges due to time constraints and limited resources, yet they use different strategies to practice reflection in their everyday practices.

Conclusion

Teachers regarded the reflective practice as a valuable practice for their learning as teachers. Reflection helps the teachers to maintain a productive learning environment. Students' progress and learning and improving in teaching were the central focus of the reflections. Teachers used journals, peer feedback, and observations, students' test results, and feedback from parents and communities as data for their reflections. Challenges faced by the teachers in their becoming reflective practitioners were nested in the context in terms of time constraints and limited resources. However, the dedication and commitment, and visioning the future of their students, were triggering factors to address such challenges.

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