

## Preparing Reflective Practitioners – Curriculum and Pedagogic Implications<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper briefly outlines what reflective practice is and why is it important for a teacher. The primary focus of the paper is on considering how reflective practice can be implemented in the teaching profession. This is dealt in three sections. The first two sections give an overview of the conceptions of reflective practice, who is considered a reflective practitioner and what constitutes reflective practice in teacher education, culled out from literature. The last section draws from these discussions to outline an approach to prepare reflective practitioners.

Teacher preparation is on the threshold of a quiet revolution. It is increasingly being recognised that the knowledge base of teacher education is “tentative and fluid” (NCTE, 2009; p.19). The social context of any classroom is recognised as being too complex for a set of principles or disparate theories to be of any practical use for a teacher. There is also empirical evidence to suggest that teachers who make a difference are autonomous, self directed professionals (Scheerens, 2000). Teacher professional development is attempting moving away from a prescription of pedagogical and managerial skills to a more interpretative mode focusing on engaging prospective teachers in extensive questioning, reflecting and constructing knowledge, that prepares a new cadre of teachers ready to be active partners in the process of school renewal (Fosnot, 1996).

The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2009) recommends that teacher education programmes focus on building prospective teachers’

capacities to construct knowledge, adapt to meet needs of diverse children and diverse contexts, and equip them as professionals who can make independent judgments at times of uncertainty and fluidity. Preparing a reflective practitioner is recognised as “the central aim” of teacher education (p.19). The next two sections attempt to unpack the notion of reflective practice and who is considered a reflective practitioner through a brief review of literature<sup>2</sup>.

### Conceptions

The genesis of reflective practice can be traced to Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* as the art of making informed, wise decisions in an action-situation. *Phronesis* provides the practical wisdom to guide committed or ethical action (praxis) and incorporates insight, perception and experience to help situate knowledge with relevance, appropriateness and sensitivity to particular contexts (Polanyi, 1966; Dunne & Pendlebury, 2003). However we owe it to John Dewey for the

development of the notion of reflective practice in education. In his book, *How We Think* (1933), Dewey points out that “reflective practice entails decision making in the immediate context” and arises out of need to solve a problem (p.4). Dewey recognised that reflective practice involves persistence and careful consideration of practice. He was of the view that we begin to reflect on a complex situation when we face it and ask ourselves what needs to be done. This changes the situation from an “indeterminate” one to a “problematic one” (p.109), which is then taken up for examining and exploring in terms of action. Reflective teaching therefore entails decision making in the immediate context and practice.

Later, Donald Schön brought reflection to the centre stage of professional knowledge. He developed the concepts of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983). Reflection-in-action is the instantaneous reflection while in classroom. Here the teacher draws upon a repertoire of knowledge and skills from her experience both to understand the situation at hand and to change it. Reflection-on-action happens after the class and is deliberative and conscious. This involves critically examining reflection-in-action, changing approaches and strategies, if need be, and testing these through further action. Development of professional knowledge and improvement in practice go together, as practitioners build up their repertoire of images, ideas, examples and actions that they draw from: “the familiar functions as a precedent or a metaphor or an exemplar of the unfamiliar” (p.138). Like Dewey, Schön also believed that programmes that encourage prospective practitioners to think carefully about what they do while they do it, learn in more profound ways.

Solomon (1987) pointed out that the social and discursive dimension of teaching learning was missing in Schon’s conception of reflection. He suggested reflection as a social practice in which articulation of ideas to and with others was crucial to the development of reflective practice. Reflective practice would therefore include situated, goal directed activities and dialogues. Reflection is not wholly contained in the mind of the individual but is “distributed” across the “situated learning discourse community” (Hoffman-Kipp et al, 2003).

There exists a strong tradition of reflection in India (Kumar, 1995). For example: Swami Vivekananda in 1941, identified a teacher as “one who can convert himself, as it were, into a thousand persons at a moment’s notice” J Krishnamuti in 1953 stipulates that a teacher must be “constantly alert, intensely aware of his own thoughts and feelings, of the ways in which he is conditioned, and of his activities and his responses”. For Gandhi teachers had to have the highest morals; Tagore points out that “Teaching has to help children be in touch with their complete life – economical, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual”; Phule and Ambedkar saw in education a potential for revolutionary social and cultural transformation. All these perspectives are strongly rooted in reflective practice.

### **Attributes of a Reflective Teacher**

As with the conceptualisation of the notion of reflective practice, a reflective practitioner has been described from differing perspectives. Beginning with Dewey (1933) who clearly spelt out that open mindedness, responsibility, whole heartedness and a passion for work are the personal qualities of a reflective teacher, there have been many conceptualisations of a Reflective teacher–

- Engages in a constant dialogue between thinking and doing (Schön,1983).
- Has the cognitive ability to make decisions in complex classroom situations, ability to critically examine underlying values and beliefs in curriculum, school processes and so on, and the ability to augment general theories with personal and peer narratives (Zeichner,1987).
- Thinks through and contextualizes teaching, makes rational choices and constructs robust personal knowledge from a range of theories, research and alternate viewpoints (Kennedy,1997).
- Willing to take risks, tries out new strategies and ideas, seeks alternatives and takes control of one's own learning and uses higher order thinking skills (Martin, 1989).
- Critically inquires into one's own practice and is self directed (Cole, 1997).
- Seeks creative and innovative approaches in classroom and school and places onus on contextualized knowledge (Coyle, 2002).
- Shows an active concern for aims and consequences not only of classroom practices but also those of policies, actively researches one's own practice leading to self monitoring, reflection and change, engages in collaboration and dialogues with colleagues (Pollard, 2005).
- Develops the core professional competencies of observation, communication, judgement, decision making and team working (Dymoke & Harrison, 2008).

As these briefly enumerated conceptions indicate, being a reflective

practitioner entails much more than just thinking about teaching. While it is recognised that professional knowledge and practice form the crux of reflective practice, an understanding of what constitutes professional knowledge and practice continues to evolve. Some of this understanding within teacher education is described in the next section.

### **Processes**

Reflective practice is now a much discussed idea in the teacher education sector and there exists a vast literature on reflective practice. A few of these that would be relevant to help identify approaches to reflective practice are briefly described in this section.

van Manen (1977) provides a hierarchy of reflective practice: the technical, which looks at what went right or wrong; the practical, which examines interpretive assumptions about one's own work; and the critical which involves critically reflecting on ethical and political dimensions of educational objectives and means of achieving them. The critical aspect of reflective practice is what matters as Van Manen describes it as "an attempt to address the gap that teachers find between what they learn about teaching and what is required in the practice of teaching" (1995).

Feiman-Nemser (1990) suggests that reflective practice draws from five kinds of orientations:

- technological - wherein the focus of reflection is on effective or efficient means to achieve particular instructional objective,
- academic - that focuses on reflecting on the explicit school curriculum or subject matter,
- practical - that helps reflect on the problems of teaching,
- personal - with a focus on

construction of self as a teacher, and

- critical – that focuses on the role of school in creating a more just and equitable society.

Valli (1992) synthesizes three types of reflective practice as reflection about themselves as teachers, reflection about the practice of teaching and reflection about critical issues involved in the processes of schooling.

Brookefield (1995) suggests reflective practice can adopt four critical lenses to provide different perspectives, that of the teacher, the learners, colleagues and established theory.

Zeichner (1995) identifies reflection as an instrument that mediates action; as a deliberation among amongst competing views of teaching; and as reconstruction of experience as three distinct perspectives of reflective practice.

Pollard (2005) views reflective practice as cyclic process by which one is able to interpret one's own practice and continuously revise it.

The brief overview of literature on reflective practice and who is a reflective practitioner shows that teacher professional development discourse has shifted focus from a narrowly conceptualised objective, generalised theories and prescriptive procedures to “practical reasoning, personal judgments and interpretations” (Dunne & Pendlebury, 2003; p.195).

### **Preparing a Reflective Practitioner**

In the present complex and changing environment received knowledge is insufficient. As the previous sections show, the discourse on reflective practice indicates that it involves a critical appraisal of not only one's actions but also the underlying assumptions and beliefs behind those actions. The central purpose of reflective practice is therefore to be critically aware of

one's thoughts and action as a means of developing genuine praxis. This view of reflective practice suggests an interpretive role of knowledge that must inform the formation of this praxis. Teacher education programmes must offer theories not as a legitimisation for practice but as an aid/prop to reflect on the nature and implications of practice. The ‘thinness’ of general theories needs to be augmented with cases and narratives that prospective teachers can relate to (Greene, 1994; Bruner, 1996).

Reflective practice thus enables interpretation of received knowledge to form robust personal knowledge that informs decision making in complex situations. This does not mean a capitulation to relativism of ‘anything goes’. Teachers need to bring their personal theories into the public domain, open to scrutiny both by colleagues and peers as well as in the light of the received knowledge (Mythili, 2012).

In this context, use of dialogues becomes an important approach of reflective practice in teacher professional development programmes (Kegan, 2000). Dialogues help share multiple perspectives with one another. When combined with reflections, dialogues can become a powerful vehicle for developing empathy to diverse views, questioning presuppositions, and understanding aspects of one's own beliefs and assumptions.

Stories and parables are another powerful pedagogic tool to widen perspectives and help make sense of profound knowledge, by relating it to the familiar. The appeal of this tool lies in the fact that there is no one singular truth, but opens up multiple interpretations, depending on one's experiences.

Maintaining reflective journals is crucial in promoting reflections.



Writing provides objectivity by offering distance, helps clarify experiences, focuses attention on significant aspects, captures data and helps integrate ideas.

Writing and analyses of teaching cases and narratives has been found to exert tremendous influence in emerging as a reflective teacher (Alder, 2006; quoted in Dymoke and Harrison, 2008).

Co-teaching, engaging in collaborative inquiry and action research are other well researched and proven means of preparing a reflective teacher.

Forming a network of practitioners provides social and shared elements which are crucial for both developing and sustaining reflective practice.

The NCFTE (2009) envisages a humanistic and liberal teacher education programme, with reflective

practice as the central aim. Its goal is to prepare humane teachers who are thinking professionals. While curriculum changes are being brought in, pedagogic approaches in teacher education programmes must gear towards preparing reflective practitioners. It requires teacher educators to continuously strive to improve their teaching by examining their own strategies and approaches, and their effects on student teachers' learning. It therefore involves a constant, critical look at the process of teaching and learning and at one's own work. As a reflective practitioner, a teacher educator is required to periodically update her professional knowledge and practice, which includes extensive reading, writing and being actively involved as communities of practitioners.

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- 1 An earlier version of the paper was delivered as a key note address at a seminar organised by St. Joseph's College, Kottayam in 2013.
  - 2 The paper is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the vast and much discussed idea of reflective practice. It is more in the nature of interpretive inquiry. The vision of NCFTE, 2009 is used as the broad framework for interpreting texts that are generally acknowledged as seminal to building up the notion of reflective practice in teacher education.