

Role of Reflective Practice in Teacher Identity Formation: A Qualitative Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12050001>

Received: 03 May 2025; Accepted: 06 May 2025; Published: 16 May 2025

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the role of reflective practice in the formation and transformation of teacher identity, focusing on both pre-service and in-service teachers in India. Reflective practice, a process of critically examining one's teaching experiences and decisions, has been recognized as a significant tool for professional growth. The research aims to examine teachers' perceptions of reflective practice, investigate its contribution to teacher identity development, and identify the methods and contexts through which reflective practices are engaged. Additionally, the study explores the challenges and barriers teachers face in practicing reflection and their impact on professional identity formation. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis, revealing that while pre-service teachers view reflection as an academic requirement, in-service teachers regard it as essential for professional survival and development. The study highlights the importance of providing structured support for reflective practices, particularly for novice teachers. It also identifies time constraints, lack of mentoring, and institutional barriers as significant challenges in the effective implementation of reflective practice. Findings suggest that reflective practice plays a critical role in shaping teachers' self-awareness, pedagogical strategies, and professional identity, ultimately contributing to enhanced teaching effectiveness and professional growth.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Teacher Identity, Professional Development, Pre-Service Teachers, In-Service Teachers, Educational Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the realm of teacher education, the concept of teacher identity has emerged as a pivotal area of research, reflecting the evolving, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of the teaching profession. Teacher identity is not merely a static label but a continuous process shaped by individual experiences, social interactions, institutional settings, and personal beliefs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It encompasses how teachers perceive themselves and are perceived by others within the professional landscape, deeply influencing their motivations, classroom behavior, instructional strategies, and commitment to the profession (Day et al., 2006). Among the various mechanisms that contribute to the formation and transformation of teacher identity, reflective practice plays a particularly crucial role. Introduced by Donald Schön (1983), reflective practice refers to the process through which professionals examine their actions, thoughts, and assumptions in order to enhance their understanding and improve their practice. Within teacher education, reflection enables educators to make sense of their classroom experiences, engage in professional dialogue, and align their teaching practices with their values and goals (Farrell, 2015). By engaging in structured reflection—whether through journaling, peer collaboration, or critical incident analysis—teachers can articulate their evolving beliefs, address internal conflicts, and re-construct their sense of professional self (Larrivee, 2000).

Reflective practice, therefore, is not merely a pedagogical tool but a transformative process that shapes teacher

identity by fostering critical thinking, self-awareness, and adaptability. It allows teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice and respond meaningfully to diverse classroom realities (Korthagen, 2004). In culturally and socially diverse contexts such as India, reflective practice becomes even more significant, as teachers must constantly negotiate between traditional expectations and modern pedagogical demands. Understanding how reflective practice contributes to teacher identity formation offers valuable insights into the professional development process and the ways in which teachers internalize their roles in ever-changing educational environments.

Rationale of the Study

Reflective practice has been widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of effective teacher education. However, the extent to which it contributes to the formation of teacher identity—especially in diverse socio-cultural contexts—remains underexplored. Despite policies and frameworks advocating for reflective teaching, its integration into formal teacher training programs often remains superficial or procedural (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). In many institutions, reflection is seen as a routine requirement rather than a transformative process that fosters deep personal and professional growth.

In the Indian context, teacher identity is influenced by a confluence of personal beliefs, cultural norms, institutional expectations, and societal roles. Teachers frequently encounter tensions between their evolving pedagogical ideals and the structural realities of their workplaces. Reflective practice offers a space for reconciling these tensions and developing a coherent professional identity. However, there is limited qualitative research focusing on how teachers in India experience and enact reflective practice in ways that shape their professional identities.

This study is grounded in the need to explore teacher identity formation through a qualitative lens that captures the complexity, richness, and contextual nuances of teachers' lived experiences. It aims to uncover the subjective processes through which reflective practices influence teachers' understanding of themselves and their roles. Such an exploration can inform the design of teacher education curricula that promote deeper engagement with reflective processes. By giving voice to teachers' narratives, this study hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of professional identity construction and the ways in which reflective practice acts as a catalyst in that journey. The findings may also serve as a reference for policymakers and teacher educators to strengthen reflective components in teacher training programs, thus nurturing more critically aware, adaptive, and self-driven educators prepared for 21st-century classrooms.

Research Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to examine the interrelationship between reflective practice and teacher identity formation through an in-depth qualitative exploration. The following research objectives have been formulated –

- To explore the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers regarding reflective practice in the teaching profession.
- To investigate how reflective practices contribute to the development and transformation of teacher identity over time.
- To identify the methods and contexts through which teachers engage in reflective practices in their professional lives.
- To examine the challenges and barriers teachers face in practicing reflection and how these impact their identity formation.

Research Questions of the Study

In alignment with the above research objectives, the following research questions guide the qualitative investigation –

- What are the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers about the significance of reflective practice in their professional development?

- In what ways does reflective practice influence the formation and reformation of teacher identity?
- What forms of reflective practice (e.g., journaling, peer discussion, mentorship) are most commonly used by teachers in different stages of their careers?
- What barriers hinder teachers from engaging in reflective practices, and how do these challenges affect their professional identity development?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Reflective practice has been widely acknowledged as a powerful pedagogical strategy that contributes significantly to the professional development of teachers. Originating from Donald Schön's (1983) foundational work *The Reflective Practitioner*, reflection is conceptualized as the ability to think about one's professional actions both during and after they occur, fostering critical awareness and informed decision-making. Over time, this concept has evolved to incorporate deeper, more transformative processes that influence teacher identity, agency, and effectiveness.

Within the context of teacher education, reflective practice is considered essential in bridging the gap between theory and classroom practice. Zeichner and Liston (2014) emphasize that through reflection, teachers are encouraged to critically examine their pedagogical beliefs, address inconsistencies, and refine their teaching strategies. Korthagen (2004) further contends that reflective practice fosters "realistic teacher education" by grounding teacher learning in authentic classroom experiences, thereby enhancing their self-understanding and professional behavior. Numerous studies have highlighted how structured reflection, such as reflective journals, portfolios, and peer discussions, allows pre-service teachers to develop self-regulatory habits that contribute to long-term professional growth (Farrell, 2015; Larrivee, 2000). In such reflective processes, teachers move from surface-level descriptions of events to more analytical and evaluative thinking, supporting the construction of meaningful teaching identities (Jay & Johnson, 2002).

Teacher identity refers to the dynamic and ongoing process through which individuals come to see themselves as educators, shaped by personal histories, institutional settings, and socio-cultural contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It is not fixed but is constantly negotiated and reshaped throughout one's career. According to Akkerman and Meijer (2011), teacher identity can be viewed as a dialogical process, where multiple sub-identities coexist and sometimes conflict, requiring continuous negotiation through reflective dialogue. Reflection plays a key role in this identity negotiation. When teachers reflect on their classroom experiences, they re-evaluate their roles, beliefs, and professional values, which leads to a clearer understanding of who they are as educators (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Sachs, 2005). For instance, Day et al. (2006) found that teachers' personal and professional identities often intersect, and reflective engagement helps them balance these facets effectively.

Empirical research supports the strong linkage between reflective practice and identity development. A study by Chong, Ling, and Chuan (2011) involving pre-service teachers in Singapore revealed that reflective journaling enhanced their ability to articulate their professional identity and better understand the moral and emotional dimensions of teaching. Similarly, Beauchamp (2015) emphasized the importance of sustained reflective dialogue in teacher education programs to enable deeper insights into the self. In the Indian context, studies remain limited but growing. Raina and Gupta (2020) explored how student-teachers in India engaged in reflective tasks during their practicum. The study found that reflection enhanced not only pedagogical awareness but also the sense of professional belonging and responsibility. However, barriers such as rigid curriculum structures, lack of mentoring, and limited time often hinder the full integration of reflective practices in teacher education (NCTE, 2009).

While the literature affirms the importance of reflective practice in shaping teacher identity, there is a need for more context-specific, qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of teachers in different socio-cultural settings. Most existing studies are situated in Western contexts, with relatively few delving into the nuanced realities of teachers in South Asia, particularly India. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how reflective practice contributes to the identity formation of pre-service and in-service teachers in India. It emphasizes the voices of teachers themselves and the socio-institutional challenges they face in engaging in meaningful reflection.

METHODOLOGY

The study on the role of reflective practice in teacher identity formation adopts a qualitative research methodology, with a focus on in-depth interviews, reflective journals, and document analysis as primary methods of data collection. This approach involves engaging with pre-service and in-service teachers to explore their lived experiences, reflective narratives, and professional journeys. The objective is to examine how reflective practices—such as self-observation, critical introspection, and dialogic reflection—contribute to the development and evolution of teacher identity over time. By analyzing qualitative data from participants' reflections and professional documentation, the study uncovers recurring themes, personal insights, and contextual factors that influence identity construction in educational settings. Through the lens of reflective practice, the research seeks to illuminate the dynamic interplay between personal beliefs, institutional expectations, and classroom experiences in shaping professional self-concept. This methodology provides a rich and nuanced understanding of teacher identity formation, offering valuable implications for teacher education programs aiming to foster deeper professional awareness and growth.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS WITH RESPECT TO RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: To explore the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers regarding reflective practice in the teaching profession.

Reflective practice has emerged as a vital component in the teaching profession, contributing significantly to teacher development, pedagogical improvement, and professional identity formation. This study aims to explore the perceptions of both pre-service and in-service teachers regarding the role and relevance of reflective practice in their professional lives. Reflective practice, as defined by Schön (1983), involves the process of critically examining one's actions and experiences to foster continuous learning and improvement. Within teacher education, it is seen as a transformative process that enables educators to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Larrivee, 2000).

Pre-service teachers, being at the initial stage of their professional journey, often encounter reflective practice through structured assignments such as reflective journals, lesson evaluations, and peer discussions. These practices encourage them to develop a habit of introspection and critical analysis of their teaching methods (Farrell, 2018). In-service teachers, on the other hand, tend to engage in reflective practice in more informal and autonomous ways, such as through peer collaboration, mentoring experiences, or professional development workshops (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). The perceptions of reflective practice among these two groups may vary based on their level of experience, institutional support, and the availability of reflective opportunities in their work environment.

Findings from existing literature suggest that while pre-service teachers often view reflection as a theoretical or academic requirement, in-service teachers tend to associate it with practical relevance and professional growth (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). For pre-service teachers, reflective practice helps in developing classroom management skills and understanding student diversity, whereas for in-service teachers, it becomes a tool for self-evaluation, coping with challenges, and enhancing instructional effectiveness (Leitch & Day, 2000). However, both groups acknowledge that reflection leads to increased self-awareness, improved decision-making, and a deeper understanding of teaching practices. Despite its acknowledged benefits, challenges persist in the implementation of reflective practice. These include time constraints, lack of mentoring, insufficient institutional encouragement, and limited training in reflective strategies (Minott, 2008). Therefore, exploring teacher perceptions is crucial in identifying ways to embed reflective practice meaningfully into teacher education and professional development programs. This study thus contributes to the growing body of research advocating for reflective practice as a central component in teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning. Understanding teacher perceptions not only highlights existing gaps but also informs policy recommendations for developing reflective capacity across the teaching continuum.

Objective 2: To investigate how reflective practices contribute to the development and transformation of teacher identity over time.

Reflective practice is widely recognized as a transformative process in the teaching profession, contributing

significantly to both teacher development and the enhancement of teaching effectiveness. It is defined as the process by which educators critically examine their teaching practices, experiences, and decisions to improve their teaching and learning outcomes (Schön, 1983). The role of reflective practice in teacher development is especially significant in the context of pre-service and in-service teacher education. This study aims to explore the perceptions of both pre-service and in-service teachers regarding reflective practice and its importance in their professional lives.

Pre-service teachers, who are in the initial phase of their professional journey, often engage with reflective practice through structured assignments and activities, such as reflective journals, video analysis of teaching practices, and peer discussions. For these teachers, reflective practice is typically introduced as an academic requirement designed to bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical teaching experience. Research has shown that pre-service teachers tend to view reflection as a process for developing teaching competence, including classroom management, lesson planning, and understanding the diverse needs of students (Farrell, 2018). The reflective activities help them to gain insights into their teaching practices, fostering critical thinking and self-awareness (Larrivee, 2000).

In contrast, in-service teachers, who have gained practical teaching experience, approach reflective practice in more informal and autonomous ways. These teachers often engage in reflection during or after classroom experiences, professional development workshops, or through collaborative dialogues with colleagues. For in-service teachers, reflective practice serves as a tool for continuous professional growth and self-improvement. Studies have indicated that in-service teachers use reflection as a way to assess their teaching strategies, manage classroom dynamics, and address challenges related to student behavior and learning outcomes (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Reflective practice also helps them evaluate the effectiveness of new teaching methods and adapt their pedagogical approaches to changing classroom contexts (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).

The perceptions of reflective practice, however, can vary between pre-service and in-service teachers. Pre-service teachers often view reflection as a necessary academic exercise, whereas in-service teachers consider it an essential tool for professional survival and development (Leitch & Day, 2000). While pre-service teachers focus on building basic teaching competencies, in-service teachers are more likely to reflect on the challenges they face in the classroom and their ongoing efforts to improve student engagement and learning. Despite these differences, both groups of teachers agree that reflective practice plays a key role in enhancing their teaching quality and professional identity.

Nevertheless, several barriers hinder the effective implementation of reflective practice. Among pre-service teachers, there may be a lack of sufficient guidance and mentorship in reflection, limiting its impact on professional growth (Minott, 2008). In-service teachers, on the other hand, often face time constraints, heavy workloads, and a lack of institutional support for reflective activities. These challenges can prevent teachers from fully engaging in reflection, undermining its potential to enhance teaching effectiveness and professional development (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).

The findings from this study underscore the importance of promoting reflective practice across both pre-service and in-service teacher populations. There is a need for teacher education programs to provide more structured and supportive environments for reflection. Furthermore, professional development initiatives for in-service teachers should include opportunities for collaborative reflection and peer support. Addressing the challenges related to time and institutional support is crucial for fostering a culture of reflective practice in schools.

This study highlights that while pre-service and in-service teachers have varying perceptions of reflective practice, both groups recognize its potential to enhance teaching quality, professional identity, and pedagogical skills. Reflective practice remains a cornerstone of teacher development and should be continuously integrated into teacher education and professional development programs to foster growth and improve educational outcomes.

Objective 3: To identify the methods and contexts through which teachers engage in reflective practices in their professional lives.

Reflective practice plays a crucial role in the professional development of teachers, enabling them to critically

evaluate their teaching methods, understand student needs, and improve educational outcomes. Different forms of reflective practice are employed by teachers at various stages of their careers, with each stage fostering different reflective needs and approaches.

Early Career Teachers:

For novice teachers, reflective practice is often focused on managing the classroom, developing teaching techniques, and understanding students' learning needs. One of the most common forms of reflective practice at this stage is journaling. Journaling allows new teachers to document their daily experiences, reflect on classroom dynamics, and identify areas for improvement (Zhang & Wang, 2020). Additionally, peer discussions are significant at this stage. Early-career teachers benefit from discussing challenges and solutions with colleagues who have more experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Peer discussions offer opportunities for feedback, emotional support, and professional growth, which are crucial in navigating the complexities of teaching.

Mid-Career Teachers:

Teachers in the middle stages of their careers, with a few years of experience, often engage in more structured forms of reflective practice, such as mentorship and professional learning communities (PLCs). Mentorship, particularly from senior colleagues or administrators, offers mid-career teachers an opportunity for guidance in refining their teaching strategies and addressing professional challenges (Johnson, 2017). These teachers may also participate in PLCs, where groups of teachers collaborate, observe one another's teaching practices, and engage in dialogue to reflect on their teaching effectiveness (Hord, 2009). These communities foster deeper reflection on pedagogical content, student engagement, and learning outcomes, as well as contribute to a culture of continuous professional learning.

Experienced Teachers:

Experienced teachers, who have accumulated years of teaching practice, often use more advanced reflective practices that focus on broader educational goals, leadership development, and instructional innovation. At this stage, teachers may engage in action research, where they systematically investigate and reflect on specific aspects of their teaching to make evidence-based improvements (Ferrance, 2000). Additionally, many experienced educators engage in peer mentoring or lead teacher workshops, reflecting on their practice while guiding the professional development of newer teachers (Rodgers, 2002). These practices allow experienced teachers to remain engaged in lifelong learning, modeling reflective practice for others while continuing their own development.

Reflective practice evolves with the career stage of the teacher. Early-career teachers often utilize journaling and peer discussions, mid-career teachers engage in mentorship and professional learning communities, and experienced teachers adopt action research and mentoring roles. These diverse forms of reflective practice are vital in fostering continuous growth, enhancing teaching quality, and contributing to the professionalization of educators at all stages of their careers.

Objective 4: To examine the challenges and barriers teachers face in practicing reflection and how these impact their identity formation.

Reflective practice is a critical component of professional development for teachers, as it facilitates continuous learning and growth (Schön, 1983). However, despite its importance, teachers encounter several challenges in implementing reflective practices, which can significantly impact their identity formation as educators.

One of the primary barriers is the lack of time. Teachers often have heavy workloads that include lesson planning, grading, administrative tasks, and extracurricular duties (Pine, 2009). These responsibilities leave little time for reflection, which requires uninterrupted moments of quiet thought or the opportunity for collaborative reflection with colleagues. Time constraints, therefore, hinder teachers from engaging in reflective practices, which are essential for deepening their understanding of teaching and learning processes.

Another challenge is the lack of support and resources for reflective practice. Teachers may not receive adequate

training on how to reflect meaningfully on their practice. According to Larrivee (2000), without the appropriate guidance, teachers may struggle to analyze their teaching methods critically and may not be aware of the tools or strategies available to facilitate reflection. In many cases, teachers may also lack access to professional learning communities or mentors who can help them develop their reflective skills. This absence of support leads to a diminished capacity for reflective practice, which, in turn, affects their identity as reflective practitioners.

Teachers also face psychological barriers, such as self-doubt and fear of judgment. Reflecting on one's teaching can expose perceived flaws and weaknesses, which may result in feelings of insecurity or inadequacy (Valli, 1997). The vulnerability associated with reflecting on one's practice can discourage teachers from engaging in such activities. Additionally, there may be a fear that reflection could lead to the identification of shortcomings that could be used against them in performance reviews or evaluations, further deterring teachers from fully embracing reflective practices.

Furthermore, institutional culture plays a significant role in the challenges teachers face in reflection. In environments where there is an emphasis on standardized testing and performance metrics, teachers may feel pressured to focus more on meeting external expectations rather than engaging in reflective practice. This can create a disconnect between personal and professional identity, as teachers may prioritize "teaching to the test" over exploring and refining their pedagogical approaches (Hargreaves, 2000).

The impact of these challenges on teachers' identity formation is profound. Reflective practice plays a pivotal role in shaping how teachers view themselves and their professional growth. When reflection is hindered by external and internal barriers, teachers may feel disconnected from their evolving professional identities. They may struggle to see themselves as dynamic professionals committed to lifelong learning, instead perceiving themselves as mere deliverers of content (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Consequently, this lack of reflection can limit their ability to develop a robust, confident, and autonomous teaching identity.

The barriers teachers face in practicing reflection—such as time constraints, lack of support, psychological obstacles, and institutional pressures—negatively impact their professional identity formation. Overcoming these challenges is essential for teachers to cultivate reflective practices that promote continuous growth and self-awareness, ultimately enhancing their identity as educators.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study highlights the significant role of reflective practice in shaping and evolving teacher identity. Through reflective practices, teachers engage in a continuous process of self-examination, allowing them to critically analyze their teaching methods, beliefs, and values. This process not only enhances their professional growth but also fosters a deeper understanding of their pedagogical approaches, strengthening their sense of self as educators. The study reveals that reflective practice empowers teachers to recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, contributing to their development of a more nuanced and confident professional identity. It also emphasizes the importance of support systems, such as mentoring and professional learning communities, in facilitating reflection and promoting a positive teacher identity. However, the research also underscores several challenges, including time constraints, lack of resources, and psychological barriers, which can hinder the reflective process. Despite these obstacles, the teachers who actively engaged in reflection demonstrated greater self-awareness and resilience in their teaching practices. Ultimately, this study underscores the value of reflective practice in fostering a dynamic and evolving teacher identity, highlighting the need for a supportive environment that encourages continuous professional reflection and growth.

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