REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN INDIAN TEACHER EDUCATION: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POST-STRUCTURALISM

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Abstract

Reflective practice is an essential element of contemporary teacher education worldwide, including India, where it is regarded as important for professional development and pedagogical efficiency. Building on the fundamental theories of John Dewey and Donald Schön, reflective practice is institutionalised in Indian teacher education through frameworks developed by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) and the National Professional Standards for Teachers. This paper uses post-structuralist theory, essentially Michel Foucault's concepts of *discourse, power/knowledge, governmentality,* and *technologies of the self*, to critically examine the implementation. The theory claims that in India, reflective practice serves less as an instrument of improvement and more as a disciplinary mechanism that reproduces normative discourses of teaching, constrains teacher autonomy, and marginalises alternative knowledge systems influenced by cultural, colonial, and institutional power relations. The consequences for curriculum reform inform the necessity for deconstructive, critically oriented approaches that challenge and disrupt prevailing power structures.

Keywords: Reflective practice, Indian teacher education, post-structuralism, Foucault, power/knowledge, teacher autonomy, curriculum reform, disciplinary mechanism

Introduction

Reflective practice has been recognised as a significant tool for teacher development. It gives teachers the potential to go beyond routine teaching techniques, supporting thoughtful, adaptive, and even transformative pedagogical approaches. India faces challenges in teacher education, including varied classroom environments and ongoing issues such as rote learning and resource constraints. The National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) and the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) identify reflective practice as fundamental and a basic professional competency to teacher education. However, underlying this importance, there is a set of assumptions that merit close examination.

This paper dwells on Michel Foucault's post-structuralist theory of discourse, power/knowledge, and technologies of the self to investigate how reflective practice is conceptualised and implemented within Indian teacher preparation programs. Rather than perceiving reflection as a neutral or empowering endeavour, a post-structuralist perspective unveils it as a historically situated practice intimately associated with power relations. This paper examines the forms of knowledge which are considered *reflective*, how normative teacher identities are constructed, and whether reflective methods genuinely promote autonomy or serve to discipline teachers within

the confines of institutional and cultural norms. On examining post-structuralist critiques, the Indian educational context, and the possibilities for reform, one can draw conclusions that reflective practices often operate more as a means of control than as a tool for improvement.

Fundamental Theories of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice in teacher education is rooted in the theories of John Dewey. In his book *How We Think* (1933), he considers *reflection* an active, deliberate process of evaluating beliefs and practices in relation to evidence and their consequences. Dewey, claiming that genuine reflection encompasses problem-solving, hypothesis testing, and a readiness to amend assumptions. Dewey's framework was characterised by democratic and experiential values, suggesting that reflection allows educators to integrate personal experience with broader societal objectives.

Besides Dewey, Donald Schön advanced the discourse in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) by introducing two vital modes of reflection: reflection-in-action, which entails real-time thinking during practice, and reflection-on-action, which entails a thorough analysis of practice post-event. Schön conceptualised professionals as being capable of generating knowledge from their own experiences instead of only depending on external theoretical frameworks. His concepts have strongly influenced teacher education, leading to the development of models that encourage student-teachers to engage in journaling and peer observation.

These educational frameworks present a rational individual capable of directing himself. In global teacher education, they have inspired methodologies that range from technical reflection to critical reflection, which question fundamental beliefs and power structures. Later, Zeichner and Liston (1996) broadened the scope and advocated for a reflective practice that emphasises social justice and equity.

The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) incorporated reflective practice into B.Ed. and D.El.Ed. curricula and urged teacher educators to produce *reflective practitioners* who could connect theoretical knowledge with practice in diverse and multilingual classrooms.

Post-Structuralist Critiques of Reflective Practice

Dewey and Schön reveal reflection as a discursive construct rather than an innate ability. Foucault, in his seminal texts, *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *Power/Knowledge* (1980), shows how modern power functions productively. power works by constituting subjects through discourses that delineate what is considered normal, appropriate, and desirable.

Linda Fendler's influential essay, *Teacher Reflection in a Hall of Mirrors* (2003), directly applies this conceptual perspective to teacher education. Fendler traces the historical development of reflection, beginning with Cartesian self-examination and progressing through the works of Dewey and Schön. She argues that contemporary reflection serves as a *technology of the self*, compelling teachers to monitor and normalise their practices in line with prevailing educational discourses. Fendler argues that this process individualises the responsibility for system-wide problems, thereby transforming structural failures—such as packed classrooms or inequitable curricula—into perceived personal deficiencies. Teachers are encouraged to involve themselves in perpetual reflection, yet the parameters established by dominant discourses constrain this practice.

Other scholars have reiterated this critique, noting that reflection frequently presupposes a unified, coherent self, thereby overlooking the fragmented nature of identities formed by language, culture, and power (Bleakley, 1999).

This presumption may obscure ideological control under the guise of empowerment, aligning practitioners with neoliberal imperatives centred on perpetual self-improvement and accountability. In teacher education programs, mandated reflection—manifested through journals, portfolios, and appraisals—can devolve into surveillance, in which educators learn to perform "reflectiveness" primarily to meet evaluative criteria rather than to engage in genuine inquiry into their practices.

These insights underscore the political dimensions inherent in reflection: it is not inherently neutral. Social and historical forces significantly influence what constitutes legitimate reflection. In postcolonial contexts such as India, this situation is further complicated by the continuing legacies of colonial education, caste hierarchies, and changes in neoliberal policy.

Reflective Practice in the Indian Context: Institutional and Cultural Norms

The Indian teacher education system functions within a highly regulated, centralised framework overseen by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) introduced a notable change by emphasising reflective practice as the "central aim" of teacher preparation, subsequently embedding this approach into coursework, practical training, and evaluation methodologies. Student-teachers are mandated to maintain reflective diaries, analyse teaching episodes, and actively engage in action research. Recently, the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST, NCTE, 2023) has incorporated a specific domain focused on reflective practice, delineating a progression from fundamental self-documentation at the proficient level to the mentoring of peers at advanced and expert stages.

However, these projects are implemented within a challenging educational landscape. An examination-driven culture, together with prescribed textbooks, large class sizes, and constrained pedagogical autonomy, significantly influences the dynamics of Indian classrooms. Traditional hierarchical organisations, reminiscent of the guru-shishya model and colonial inspection practices, often prioritise compliance over critical engagement. Numerous teacher education institutions, particularly those located in rural or under-resourced regions, contend with overcrowded programs, overextended faculty, and pedagogical approaches centred on rote learning.

Research on teacher education in India indicates that reflective practice often remains superficial. Student-teachers typically produce descriptive accounts rather than engage in critical analysis, focusing predominantly on surface-level issues such as classroom management while neglecting more intricate inquiries into caste, gender, language, and structural inequality. Journals are occasionally made to fulfil evaluation criteria rather than to explore significant dilemmas authentically. Similarly, in-service teachers encounter barriers to productive reflection, including time constraints, insufficient collegial support, and worry relating to potential administrative repercussions.

The postcolonial aspect adds further complexity. Western reflective models, grounded in individualistic assumptions, may conflict with collectivist traditional customs and the historical background of subjugation. Therefore, reflection may unintentionally perpetuate colonial binaries—such as modern versus traditional—thereby marginalising indigenous pedagogies that are based on communal knowledge and oral traditions.

Critical Analysis through a Post-Structuralist Lens

A Foucauldian analysis shows that reflective practice in Indian teacher education functions as a governmental technology, producing regulated, self-governing individuals.

Firstly, the dynamics of power and knowledge dictate what is considered legitimate reflection within this context. NCTE-endorsed frameworks tend to draw on Western theories (such as those of Dewey and Schön), thereby marginalising local or subaltern knowledges. For instance, a rural teacher who engages in reflection on community-based learning may be perceived as unprofessional. Consequently, valid reflection becomes aligned with norms that are primarily urban, upper-caste, and conducted in English.

Secondly, the mandates surrounding reflection operate by mechanisms of governmentality. The use of journals and performance appraisals fosters self-surveillance among teachers; they internalise predefined standards and come to view their personal shortcomings as the primary issue rather than recognising system-wide challenges (e.g., attributing student disengagement in under-resourced schools to personal failings). This system aligns with neoliberal governmentality as articulated in policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, resulting in the development of "flexible" teachers who are prompted to engage in continuous improvement to meet performance standards.

Thirdly, aspects of disciplinary power manifest through the hierarchical supervision structures. Within District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) colleges, reflections are scrutinised for conformity with accepted standards, thereby creating a panoptic effect. Teachers engage in reflective practices not freely but rather to avoid negative evaluations, thereby perpetuating compliance. For numerous female and lower-caste educators, this paradigm echoes historical cycles of subjugation, further entrenching marginalised subject positions.

Lastly, the notion of the "reflective practitioner" in India represents a constructed subjectivity—one that is rendered autonomous only within rigorously defined discourses. Rather than serving as a liberating exercise, reflection commonly implies disciplinary measures that individualise critique and sustain prevailing inequalities.

Implications for Teacher Autonomy, Professional Judgment, and Curriculum Reform

If reflective practice currently undermines autonomy by tethering judgment to normative standards, then reform must go beyond superficial changes. Post-structuralist and postcolonial frameworks advocate for deconstructive methodologies.

Teacher education should scrutinise power relations, raising questions such as, "Whose voices are marginalised within this curriculum?" or "How does caste influence classroom dynamics?" Encouraging collective reflection through teacher inquiry groups could challenge individualistic models, promoting solidarity and resistance to prevailing norms.

Curriculum reform may benefit from integrating critical multiculturalism, postcolonial theory, and native knowledge systems, facilitating reflection on issues such as linguistic hegemony, gender norms, and epistemic injustice. Engaging with theorists such as Derrida (notably through deconstruction) or Spivak (pertaining to subaltern voices) can disrupt the binaries between theory/practice and reflective/routine, thereby focusing on marginalised perspectives.

These fundamental changes would correspond with the National Education Policy 2020's advocacy for teacher autonomy while genuinely addressing power relations. Such reforms necessitate structural support, including reducing regulatory burdens, allocating protected time for inquiry, and cultivating professional cultures that prioritise dissent over conformity. If reflective practice currently undermines autonomy, then reform must go

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Conclusion

Reflective practice occupies an essential position in Indian teacher education. While it rhetorically seems good, it often operates as a poststructural mechanism control, producing compliant subjects in postcolonial, hierarchical, and neoliberal discourses. A Foucauldian analysis reveals the underlying implications: reflection is not a neutral process; rather, it legitimises certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others.

The way forward does not reject reflection; rather, it radicalises. Teacher education must reframe reflection as a platform for resistance and opportunity, adopting deconstructive, collective, and critically oriented approaches. Only reflections contribute to a more just and emancipatory teaching profession.

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