



Research Paper

## Critical Reflection in a Professional Context as an Educator

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper brings forth the variety of knowledge, reflective and critical processes, values and contextual factors that shape educators' practice, and begin to explore the complex terrain of contemporary educational research. Using my own experiences as an educational practitioner as a case study I have demonstrated my understanding of how these dimensions apply in my own field of educational practice. I am reflecting critically on my development within my field of educational practice considering seminal experiences from my professional career to date. I have analysed the critical experiences that have shaped my development as an educator in relation to the broader historical, socio-political and educational landscapes and identify and analyse the impact they had or are having on my personal and professional identity. I have described and analysed critically the condition of knowledge in my field of educational practice (types of knowledge, underpinning values, contextual constraints and inherent dilemmas), discussed how is it changing and how it impacts on practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Variety of Knowledge, Reflective and Critical Processes, Socio-Political and Educational Landscape, Educational Practice.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

I can relate to what Begg (2011) described as a nomadic trajectory to his journey. I believe it was an internal search for me as well as I began my career as an educator without any goal in mind. The beginning of my professional life as an educator can be credited to an approach which Furlong and Whitty (2017) described as an amalgamation of craft knowledge and personal liberal education (which is a sub categorisation of practical knowledge traditions). A change in policy was taking place across the western countries and specifically in England during the New Right Era which enabled liberally educated graduates without conventional teacher training to teach in a school provided the school deems the applicant fit with appropriate teaching skills. This approach was adopted by many organisations. One such organisation was the 'Teach For All' network of organisations working in countries like China, Australia, France, America, England and Wales. One of their wings is also in India, known as Teach For India. I had the opportunity to be a part of the second batch of fellows that taught in Delhi, India in 2012.

Forde (2014) highlights how professional knowledge is built over a period where experience is cumulated, selected, sorted and interpreted to create the final piece of knowledge based on which one can initiate or continue a professional practice. While teaching as a fellow in Teach For India, I was placed in a low-income marginalised community. In those two years as a teacher, I was able to build my experiences of teaching in a classroom, interacting with the environment of the students and the community and understanding how the elements in the environment influence the learning process of the students which included stakeholders (like teachers, community members and so on.) that play a crucial role in the lives of the students.

To begin with, I felt I was never exposed to a structure where I was taught how to engage in reflection nor was I introduced to any particular framework which would enable me to reflect. Over the years I had been part of sessions where a facilitator would just ask the participants to reflect and people would talk about what they had seen and how they had felt. I was quite aware back then that it wasn't shivering me critically for sure but didn't know the way forward. I did feel a vagueness in such sessions with an instinctive understanding that these sessions need to be more. Nevertheless, I give credit to those whose sessions and the facilitation did take me through a learning curve and there was a lot of learning through which I was able to grow professionally and personally.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE**

However, Brookfield's (2017) narration pushed me to dive deep into the practices as a teacher and as an educator and I was able to relive those experiences in the context of critical reflection, where I could see myself turning into a performer in the classroom in the presence of an observer and or realising the presence of microaggression in my thoughts while interacting with students. Though I never said anything out loud, now I realise how the microaggressions crawled into my thoughts and spread out in the class through my actions.

Schön (1983) is of the view that when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context and is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique but constructs a new theory of the unique case.

We can see a reflection once we are in front of a mirror or a reflective surface. If we move away, we can no longer see the reflection. While in front of the mirror we can engage with the reflection. The reflection is connected with us. It makes us see how we are moving, our expression, our flaws, our perfections, us as a whole as well as nuanced angles when we choose to see it. We are not dependent on the description given by others. We can see what is in front of us in an as detailed manner as we want to. Similarly, while in action the person can reflect and go deep and research more about the actions, reactions or consequences in reference to the act he/she is performing.

For instance, when I was teaching in grade 2 as a fellow of Teach for India, one fine day I was frustrated for not being able to meet the learning outcomes. One little student noticing my frustration walked up to me and said, "Please do not be sad. I am here. Please teach me". At that moment I realised that I do not have to teach learning outcomes. I need to teach students. I was a facilitator who was there to facilitate learning. I wasn't there to teach learning outcomes.

This instance made me engage in thinking about my actions while I was committing those actions. I continuously kept thinking if the pedagogy I had been using is effective and kept a check for understanding. I refrained from separating the means and the ends. I stopped treating my teaching practice as a goal and tried to engage with it interactively and continuously defined and redefined my problematic situations in the class.

Brookfield (2017) evidently stated the presence of hegemonic dynamics in a classroom. He clearly articulated the degree of complications that exist and how they may offend or target any individual if not addressed with conscious behaviour. This entire explanation made me think about the complexities that existed in marginalise community schools in India, where I too had a chance to teach and had probably been unaware of these complexities to its deepest extent. India not only has a different race but there exists caste differentiation, religious differentiation and class differentiation. In each classroom one would find such differentiations, where the hegemonic dynamics get magnified manifold; and there has not been any capacity building of the teachers (especially in the rural set-up) to be aware of these dynamics, leave alone addressing them. Thinking about power dynamics, I realised that power plays an important role within the classroom as well. There will be some students who are always vocal and ready to respond. As a teacher I sensed a tendency to always look at them expecting a quicker response and after getting that response I would think I have successfully achieved my learning objective ignoring the fact that many other students who did not get a chance to participate might not have understood the topic. Rearranging the furniture does not rearrange the power relations (Brookfield, 2017). There will always be some student who have a strong personality and will dominate classroom discussions and there will be students who are frustrated or scared with previous education or classroom experiences and will mistrust the classroom environment. Whether students are sitting in a circle or in a row, I always felt that the onus is on the teacher to build the trust to do away with any hegemonic relationship or situation and ensure that every child gets a chance to speak equally.

In this context I felt that the fourth lens as explained by Brookfield (2017) actually to be helpful for me as engaging, in theory, would offer me concepts to aid my practice and interrogate my underlying presuppositions. Engaging with theory would enable me to understand the theory behind my actions. In the hindsight, when I look at my classroom interactions (and also community interactions) there had been so many microaggressions that I had committed and interacted with hegemonic dynamics where the participating people or students themselves weren't aware of such transgressions. I am only getting aware of it because I am reading about it. Reading about the theorized cause of my actions and then reflecting back on it is like a pause one takes to take a breather. It is liberating.

Brookfield (2017) brought my attention to a fine line that exists in a classroom, crossing which the teacher might confirm students' belief that education is a pointless waste of time. This is where the role of assumptions come in and with assumptions the role of notions that exists in a society which draws submissions from people to the assumptions in manner blatant enough that no one questions it (Critical Social Theory). Most students do enter the classrooms feeling disinterested. I have interacted with students (community members) from the villages in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana in India who believed that the education will not lead to any good for them. That was because they have never realised what is quality education and how teacher can ignite the zeal to be curious and make learning fun for students. The teachers that existed before were

professionally inadequate and used to spend their time outside their classes rather than teaching in a classroom and made themselves inaccessible for the community members. An invisible pedestal was created for the teachers who were beyond any questions and accountability. Every year, with the new batch of students coming in these notions about teachers get emphasised and the assumptions about education get inscribed in the minds of the students. Similar assumptions exist in the minds of the teachers and I was no exception to it. I too entered in the classrooms with assumptions about the students that I had taught. It was when I started interacting with the students that I realised that they interpret my words and actions in a way that is different from what it was meant by me. Using the students' eyes, I was able to clarify or change my assumptions and corroborate it to understand when the assumptions actually are true or make sense. Another way is to engage with colleagues and use their perceptions to see our classroom practices in a new light and discuss their observations and understanding of our responses in the field of work. Such processes which happened with me in Teach For India and other professional circles helped me critically analyse my practices and improve it. Classrooms are being more diverse with each passing day. Hence, it is getting important to acknowledge the lens of the students to understand the needs and address different perspectives, which will only lead to the growth of the teacher.

However, the most beneficial way of improving myself and my professional practices was me being honest with myself. As Brookfield (2017) had mentioned, using my personal experiences as a teacher, I was able to become a student again to study the experiences and transfer my insights to my own teaching. This practice in fact sowed the seed to engage in critical thinking.

### **III. THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL REFLECTION IN TEACHING PRACTICE**

Reflection, Critical Reflection, Critical Thinking and other terms have been overused in the domain of education for professional growth and the meanings have been overlapped. It is being used excessively to an extent that organizations are created that solely work on professional development using reflection, critical thinking, etcetera. Being present in some of these discussions I could say that such random definitions come up for each version of 'reflection' that one can easily get confused. Rogers (2002) raised the question of how one can differentiate between reflection and normal thinking. The different versions of reflection are being used interchangeably and no one is calling it out. Such situations definitely take out the interest to engage in such discussions. Mostly such reflections hovered around self-absorption talking about individual's feelings. There are very few set ups that teach how to engage in reflection. Dewey (1933/1998) was of the view that reflective thinking begins with a purpose to resolve an issue or problem through examination of different viewpoints eventually leading to a clear and settled situation. Such clarity is often missed in these sessions based on reflective thinking.

Reading what Hatton and Smith (1995) wrote made me realise that it is important to have professional experience to build a base for reflection. It is rather naive to expect a young person newly in a job on his/her first day to engage in reflection. Reflection should not be introduced to new people in the beginning because it is complicated and might lead to disinterest on the learner's part (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Thinking about my past professional experiences, I believe I am now at a better position to critically think and use the instances from the past to find solutions for current issues. I have lived in villages for five years day in and day out, working towards improving the quality of education in those places. With each passing day I was able to understand the social, political and cultural dynamics. My lived experiences helped me get into the nuances of such places. There were challenges of getting permission for work, addressing the ego of local leaders, creating a working relationship with existing teachers and also the need to deal with my own psyche.

Boud (2001) asks us to be conscious of the fact that there is a tendency to portray one's best side while engaging in reflection. This I have noticed where people tend to romanticise their past experiences and the darker side is forgotten. There have been instances where I had failed terribly. Sometimes failing to get permission for a class or conducting pathetic teaching learning sessions. I used to get conscious about mentioning such instances as they would reflect me in poor light. However, it is important to acknowledge those instances as only then I can work towards addressing it.

Kemmis and Smith (2008) is of the opinion that a strong base of experience is required to create ethics to deal with dilemmas and problems. While working in the villages I was able to draw from my past experiences of addressing the insecurities of teachers that existed with me entering their schools. I was able to manage the power dynamics by learning from my failures and building relationships with the stakeholders and making them realise that it will be a relation of mutual benefit where we will be working for their professional growth and school's development.

### **IV. GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION AND REFLECTION**

Hargreaves (2000) states that teaching is undergoing transformation and I believe this transformation will never stop. There will always be new developments and new challenges towards improving the learning environment for students. The recent pandemic showed us that there is a need to evolve to use

technology to reach out to students who were unable to access schools. Teacher needs to bring in change in the pedagogy to cater to the ever-evolving minds of students being exposed to new elements every day. Also, the pandemic has reemphasised that children can take the ownership of their learning journey with just some guidance from adults. Teachers need to promote such learning cultures.

Furlong & Whitty (2017) talks about how over the years the approach towards research or education could be categorized into three segments of academic, practical and integrated knowledge traditions. These categorisations put forward how knowledge has been collected, assimilated and then disseminated over the years across people. I can vividly remember how there was an emphasis on in my early school days there was a focus on understanding the theories for any subject within the four walls prescribing to the set protocols. As I moved ahead one could sense a shift in the learning styles where focus was on learning through practice by experiencing what was being learnt and which came to be known as learning by doing in the circle of educators. In the recent decade I was introduced to the third category which sees practical knowledge being drawn from (maybe implicitly) from academic context. This category talks about education as an applied learning process drawing from academic and practical learning traditions, thereby integrating the best of both the worlds to produce new knowledge or improve on the existing ones.

The evolution of the field of education as put forward by Furlong and Whitty (2017) has actually led me to think about the meaning of the word 'Education' and its purpose of catering to a huge population (mass schooling). Etymologically the word 'Education' is derived from the Latin word 'ēducātiō', which is an act of breeding, rearing and bringing up a child or individual. However, over the years the essence of the meaning has changed. As Sir Ken Robinson said in one of his Ted Talks in 2006 that the current education system was designed to meet the needs of the industrial revolution that began in Europe in the 18th century. The focus shifted from bringing up an individual to creating a workforce for the industries and hence the hierarchy of subjects came into existence where Math and English got importance over other subjects. Could this aspect of history have influenced the way training of school- teachers was conducted in the anglophone countries and how training of school teachers has been tied up to the realm of Education? The influence of prominent subjects (Math and English) can still be seen in the education structure, which I myself have experienced as a Teach For India Fellow. Schön (1983) points out that science and technology had shaped the history of western countries since Reformation and the professions related to these fields got considered as important to move towards human achievements. Thus, the hierarchy of professions were created and from there hierarchy of subjects evolved during the industrial revolution.

Furlong and Whitty (2017) also talk about 'generic mode' which is a form of knowledge managed by external entities like government or private and social organizations who are performance centric. The performance of students is measured using the standardised metrics designed by such organizations or entities. A standardised form of measuring the performance of students directed towards completion of a standardised task or objective is actually directed towards creating a workforce engaged in standardised work at a large scale addressing the needs of manufacturing and industrial sector. Biesta (2015) noticed the trend of development of performance indicators in the space of education. There has been tremendous emphasis on collection of data to show education interventions are meeting the predefined standards. Biesta (2015) defines such practices as bureaucratic culture of accountability. Such scenarios are prominent in many developing countries. In India, some state governments like Delhi Government are working towards improving the quality of education in the schools. However, it can be said that to quantify their achievements, the ease of measurement was prioritised over the quality of performance by the state governments, which led to creation of standardised performance indicators in collaboration with other civil society organisations. Can one single curriculum (be it national or international) be implemented across a country like India with diverse culture. Can any pedagogy or curriculum be culture or context proof.

What Hargreaves (2000) defines as the postmodernity has seen development in technology in the space of education which is known as EdTech. This era of postmodernity has seen enhancement in the access of education and knowledge along with commercialization of education. In India it can be seen in the mushrooming of multinational companies or already existing companies entering the space of education. Byju's (the official sponsor of FIFA World Cup 2022) is one such example of commercialization of education where subscription model is being pitched to disseminate standardised lessons. Biesta (2015) states that there is prominent trend of treating students as customers.

One can also find teacher development programs (created by private or civil society organisations) adopted by government to create a standardised parameter to evaluate teachers' professional engagement. Such teacher development programs are based on intrinsic reflection. Over the years I have seen many teachers getting the hang of such programs, where they have come to know what and how to response to questions related to reflections. The responses are superficial in nature given just to tick the check boxes. There had been instances when I had seen teachers coming out of such teacher development sessions and talking in a derogatory manner about the program and expressing how frustrating it is for them to attend such sessions without any

benefits. McLaughlin (1999) is of the opinion that one cannot keep using reflection to think about one's experiences and practice. Reflection should be relevant to teaching and its goal for an educator. People should know the process of reflection as flawed reflection can be harmful.

Reflection as a process needs to be continuous and interactive (internal or external) through which some meaning can be derived. Reflective thinking cannot be disjointed sets of ideas (however wonderful or educative) without creating a knowledge base through which some meaning is derived and learning evolves. Dewey (1933/1998) was of the view that ideas in themselves do not construct knowledge. Mere ideas might be intellectual for the mind to engage but would not be impactful for the human mind and its growth. It is important that the intellectuality of the idea has to transition to actuality through which new facts, results or improvements can be crafted and hence contribute to human growth.

Rogers (2002) states that curiosity is important to engage in reflective thinking. One would have to make a progression from reflection to reflective thinking. Brookfield's (2017) writing describes how one engages with different aspects of reflection. Each progression is deeper than the previous one. However, it is interesting to note that the demarcations blur out and each type of reflection is derived from the other and overlaps with one another. Hence the process would have to be rigorous to actually experience each of the aspects. It cannot be a haphazard and unstructured contemplation of any situation, but a conscious journey from collecting data to actually formulating of theory. This can be equated with Schön's (1982) thought on reflection in action, where one would have to draw out learnings from the past to create a meaning that can be applied to create a knowledge base for implementation.

Reflective thinking needs to happen in a group or community where ideas can be bounced around, polished further or improved upon by analysing the strengths and weaknesses. A collaborative process needs to be in place for affirmation to take place and broadening the field of understanding. Such collaborative processes provide scope for professional growth which is also a purpose of engaging in reflective thinking. However, there had been instances when I noticed people not being open-minded towards new ideas. There was always resistance towards difficult conversations. Though on the face people always talked about how it is important to have an open mind and respect different ideas from different people, there were many instances where it didn't happen. Having said that I was also fortunate enough to work with people who accepted absurd ideas and worked on it and polished it further for the betterment of the stakeholders that we were working with.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Being introduced to these processes now, I am more aware of my level of engagement with reflective thinking. As I sit here and think about my past, I do realise that there had been many instances when ideas had been formed but those ideas did not actually lead to any creation of a knowledge base. Those were bright sparks but weren't continuous enough and seemed disjointed. I was unable to hold on to those ideas and actually create a seamless continuous process of meaning-making thereby not creating something concrete and tangible for the students that I had taught. In contrast, they had also been instances where I was able to work on different ideas and engaged in making meaning out of which I was able to create pedagogical interventions in math and in language for my students.

As an educator or an education practitioner, it is of utmost importance that one engages in practices that enables one to reflect on his/her work and endeavours towards researching better methodologies in one's professional realm. This strikes a strong relationship between reflective practice and research practice. This relationship keeps on evolving with no clear definition of a 'right' or 'wrong' perspective. The idea is to continuously evoke a desire to improve by critically engaging with previous professional practices, peers and other stakeholders. The intent is to seek feedback from self, peers and other stakeholders. These processes eventually lead to one's professional growth and enable one to reflect upon his/her action while practising it thereby creating a scenario of reflection in action. Such a scenario enables one to continuously see and evaluate his/her action while enacting this. This could be the situation where the true meaning of 'reflection' is represented.

Schön (1983) tries to bring in such a thought process while talking about reflection in action. He uses various instances to put forward this argument. The instances of an architect and psychologist engaging with a problem along with their apprentices showcase how reflection in action provides a new perspective of viewing a problem by constantly redefining the problem and the situation and segregating from the end objective and focusing on the means without it being connected to the end goal.

I can relate to Schön's idea of reflection being embedded in the process of action. I have felt several times the need to continuously engage with my thoughts while taking a class and engaging with students. There has been a constant need to evaluate my actions in the class or with community members with an endeavour to improve it further for better impact. One might have to pause and take into consideration various factors to move forward.

However, this sometimes brings me to a halt. It becomes difficult to retrieve all past required experiences relevant to the situation. It does become difficult to have a fast-paced thought process and sometimes it is necessary to say that one would have to get back. I believe this is one major limitation of engaging in the reflection in action. Another aspect that sometimes proves to be a drawback is our past experiences. Sometimes memories from the past may get blurred or biased due to the evaluation of our knowledge base. Such blurred or biased experiences can corrupt the framework that one might be using to define the problem at hand. Piaget's model of cognitive development might be one such instance where past experiences may blur out the reality of the present world with a biased framework.

Over the years most of the changes in the education and education policy are governed by the political party in power and its ideology. Historically we can see it in Russia, China, Europe and U.S.A. The recent example can be seen in India where the government had changed textbooks and curriculum to suit its ideology and not much has been discussed with the grassroot teachers or educators. It is also true for the past governments in India as well. The same has been highlighted by Sachs (2016).

A school management is dependent on various factors. I have seen while working with schools and education boards in the states of Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana that government policies and external factors impacts a school's functioning. Sahlberg (2016) points out that government policies that determine educational reforms are influenced by neo capitalism and not by education-based thought processes. Globalization of education began in 1980s. It started with super-powers like England, U.S.A., France, Germany and Netherlands feeling inadequate about their education system. Hence, came the idea of standardising frameworks by choosing the best practices without any contextualisation. Standardisation also helped in the ease of measurement, as things which could be measured easily could be implemented easily. A school's primary focus (especially of schools in urban India) is to improve its rating/ranking, be it at the government parameters or parameters set by private organisations. Braun, Ball, Maguire, and Hoskins (2011) mentions how Ofsted ratings and league table positions influence school practice and self-perceptions. These evaluations use standardised parameters and are not contextualised. Now this creates ripple effects. Better ranked schools receive more admissions leading to more funds for improvement. Those schools also receive more attention from the authorities hence leading to more development for itself.

Sahlberg (2016) believes that standardization is not advisable in education because factors like cultural context, social context and many other differentiating factors that influence a school, a teacher and the teaching-learning environment are not taken into consideration. Countries that are doing well in education in recent years like Finland or Singapore or South Korea have actually not followed the standardization processes or had never been a part of the global education reform movement. The notion that standardisation will give a platform for competition which will lead to improvement is flawed. Quality can only improve through collaboration and cooperativeness.

Sachs (2016) talks about teachers and their accountability and how politicians often invoke this accountability in reference to the quality of education and student learning outcome. However, I feel that this accountability should be towards the students and the community members. In my work with schools in villages I haven't seen community members holding school administration and teachers accountable for the quality of education. I had to organise sessions with the people to make them aware of the responsibilities of the school and how the teachers are responsible for providing quality education.

Shulman (1987) is of the view that education has been reduced to knowledge transmission and the knowledge created has become a product which is measured by what students reproduce in examination. The focus of education interventions has been the learning output. This can be seen in practice of big educational organisations and teaching fellowships producing reports on students learning output and producing standardised assessments to evaluate a student's performance which then reflects a teacher's performance. The process of creating curiosity and creativity is forgotten in the commercialised reductionist approach. Biesta (2015) wrote that viewing education in the realm of achievement of qualification have created a disbalance and exposed students to immense pressure to perform (and achieve higher learning outputs). Sadly, such pressure often led to suicide of students and sometimes even of teachers. As per 2020 records of National Crime Record Bureau a student took their own life every 42 minutes in India.

Such stats sometimes push me in certain dilemmas related to my work. If not address properly it also burden me with guilt and make me question the validity of my work. This is where reading Cuban's (1992) insights had been helpful. He says that it is important to distinguish between problem and dilemmas. Fransson and Grannas (2013) are of the opinion that dilemmas would always exist. They are part of our daily lives and we should learn to live with it. As educators we must deal with administrators, policy makers, students which will lead to conflict between our and their thought processes eventually leading to certain dilemmas. I might not agree with many decisions and ideologies leading to power and ideological tussle. Such tussles lead to mental disturbances if not addressed. One such instances was when a leader of a village (who is called Sarpanch in India) in Haryana wanted the solar light to be installed in the vicinity of his compound. Everyone in the village

agreed with it as the leader was quite influential. I could clearly see that the need of a solar streetlight was actually in another lane.

As an education management professional, I have noticed that when one works within the realm of an organisation there are rules. Rules that are set by funders or government. Kemmis and Smith (2008) observes that such rules restrict an educator from engaging in praxis. Individually I felt that my focus had been on following those rules and the reflection was not organic for me and it became difficult to reflect in practice to actually create a beneficial outcome for the stakeholders. In such a dilemma I used to think who decides what is right or wrong and aren't such definitions subjective. Also, is it possible to take a moral stand and not do something against our morality by being against the rules of the government or other entities that somehow influence our life. An employee will be asked to leave if he/she doesn't follow the rules of the organisation that employed her/him however immoral the rules may be. For instance, around 100 Delhi Government School Teachers died during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. Teachers in India were deployed on Covid-related duties. Now there is one thing to volunteer for such a cause; but no one was given an option. Then there is also the issue of lack of human resource. So, who takes the call, or is it that people would have to follow the call of those in authority? These are the dilemmas that exist. In such scenarios I understand the importance of segregating a problem from a dilemma. This perception would put my mind to rest and to not indulge in self-blame.

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