

Towards more Reflective Teacher Education

Mediations and Barriers

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Abstract

The multifarious benefits of making 'Reflection' a core guiding factor in teacher education are well articulated in recent literature. It is not only desirable but almost essential to create reflective prospective teachers who can deal with the complexities of the field of education. Various pertinent perspectives have come to fore in last few decades that attempt to understand the phenomenon of 'reflection' and attempts have also been made to understand the relevance of 'reflection' particularly in the context of teacher education. It becomes important that teacher education programmes make informed choices on the basis of these theoretical perspectives and at the same time give careful considerations to the research findings that talk of reflection in teacher education. It is only then we can stay assured that efforts have been made to make teacher education a reflective practice rather than a mere skill and knowledge delivering endeavour.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to reflect is one of the desired skills in almost every profession. To talk of teaching in particular, it is a highly skilled profession and requires the teachers to perform a variety of tasks in order to work effectively. Bhogayata (2000)

asserts that “Reflective practice is required because the teachers of the future should be reflective decision makers in terms of thoughtful persons intrinsically motivated to analyse a situation, set goals, plan and monitor action, evaluate results and reflect on their own professional thinking” (p.117).

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Socrates is credited as being the first educator to prize reflective ability (Braun and Crumpler, 2004, p.59). However, it is not easy to employ reflective thought to a situation or an event. According to Pollard (2002), "One can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching.... To be genuinely thoughtful, we must be willing to sustain and protract that state of doubt which is the stimulus to thorough inquiry" (p.4). Dewey (1933) also proposed that the entire process of reflection is directed towards finding the solution of any perplexing situation.

This paper attempts to present the prominent theoretical views on 'reflection' and 'reflective practice' in the context of teacher education. It further elaborates on the need of making 'reflection' an important guiding factor in teacher education drawing on the findings of various research studies. It makes suggestions in the form of different mediations that should be included in teacher education if the objective is to produce reflective prospective teachers. Subsequently, it briefly talks about different factors that act as barrier to reflection.

To begin with, the term 'reflection' or 'reflective practice' carries different explanations and orientations and therefore there is a lack of any consensus on the same. Larrivee (2008) elaborates that "this expansive range of meanings makes it difficult to decipher research findings and

has led to attempts to define differing types of reflection. Reference to numerous levels, stages, dimensions, or types of reflection are indicative that reflection is generally viewed as an incremental process" (p.342).

However, a number of classical writings have emerged in the field of 'reflection' and appear frequently in research studies conducted in the field of reflection. These perspectives have shaped the concept of 'reflection' in the past and continue to impact the research work carried in the field of 'reflection' in the context of teacher education.

This section of the paper is further subdivided into two sub-sections.

The first sub section deals with generic theoretical perspective on reflection.

The second sub section presents a comprehensive theoretical/conceptual framework for reflection in pre-service teacher education.

GENERIC THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON REFLECTIVE THINKING

The writings on 'reflection' define this concept in two major ways; the first one see reflection more as a cyclical process while the second one tries to describe reflection in terms of hierarchies.

1. Reflection as a Cyclical Process

John Dewey (1933) and Berlak and Berlak (1981) were few of the proponents of the cyclical concept of reflection. They viewed the process

of reflection as an essentially cyclic one. The famous American educationist John Dewey took the concept of reflection from philosophy and introduced it in psychology and pedagogy, way back in 1933.

The need for reflection arises when a person confronts a difficulty and finds himself/herself in a state of doubt, perplexity or hesitation. Without this felt mental difficulty there is no starting point for engaging in the process of reflection. Once the problematic situation is witnessed, next is to discover the facts that will serve the purpose of solving the problem. These are based on reasoning rather than abrupt thoughts and views. The person involved may derive the possible solutions either on the basis of some similar past experiences or would look for other facts suggesting the possible solutions. At the next stage of evaluation consists of a review of the implementation process and the consequence of the solution. Solutions are accepted or rejected. If the solution proves successful, the instance may be stored for subsequent situations or may become routine. However, if the solution is not successful, the problem may be reframed and the process may be repeated (Dewey, 1933). So for Dewey, reflection was essentially a cyclical process.

Dewey believed that inquiry is the life blood of every science and is constantly engaged in every art, craft and profession (Brubacher, Case and Reagan, 1994). He

differentiated reflective action from 'routinised action'. Pollard (2008) mentioned, "According to Dewey, routine action is guided by factors such as tradition, habit and authority and by institutional definitions and expectations. By implication it is relatively static and is thus unresponsive to changing priorities and circumstances. Reflective action, on the other hand, involves a willingness to engage in constant self-appraisal and development. Among other things it implies flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness" (p. 14).

Dewey (1933) asserts that reflective thinking has a purpose. He further adds, "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends constitute reflective thought" (p.9).

Dewey put forth the importance of three distinct attitude traits namely wholeheartedness, open mindedness and intellectual responsibility. He asserted that these traits are central to the ability to carry out any meaningful task of reflection.

Thus, reflection as a cyclical process is essentially a process of realizing and framing the problem, creating possible sets of solution or hypothesizing, testing the possible solution and eventually rejecting or accepting a solution for the problem. In this light, it very much resembles the scientific method as proposed by John Dewey as well (Dewey, 1933).

Berlak and Berlak (1981) on the other hand studied three schools in detail and focused on the countless dilemmas that teachers face in their day-to-day working. They tried to see the relation that exists between the micro world of the school with the macro world of factors, beliefs and influences in society. Dilemmas represent an increasingly interaction of internal and external sources. In order to resolve these dilemmas a need arise for the teachers to use professional judgment and reflection.

It is important on the part of the teachers to have professional expertise in the form of reflective ability and competence to develop evidence based practice. On the basis of their research work done in three schools they listed down major dilemmas faced by the teachers. A few of the dilemmas given by them are; 'Organising the children on an individual basis vs. organising the children as a class', aiming for quality in school work vs. aiming for quantity in school work', allocating teacher time, attention and resources equally among all the children vs. paying attention to the special needs of particular children' and so on (Pollard, 2002, 2008).

So, the basic purpose of inquiry, for teachers and non-teachers is to enable them to engage in reflective action. Engaging in this process requires that each of the participants render as problematic what they have been taking for granted about what is happening in the classroom....

Using the dilemma language to structure critical inquiry involves an examination, from the widest possible range of perspectives, or present pattern of resolution, alternative possibilities, and the consequences of present and alternative patterns, the origins of present patterns and of proposals for alternatives (Pollard, 2002).

So it can be ascertained that what Berlak and Berlak (1981) proposed in terms of reflective practice was a cyclical reflective process.

2. Reflection as a Hierarchical Process

According to Van Manen (1971) there are three different levels of reflection namely technical rationality, practical action, and critical reflection. Each stage is higher from the one that precedes it; thus critical reflection is the most complex and evolved level of reflection.

At technical rationality level the task of reflection entails a simple recapitulation and explanation of events and theoretical connections remain at a superficial level, if at all are made. At the second level i.e. practical reflection, the person engaging in the task of reflection basically attempts to understand the assumptions that underlie specific classroom practices, curricula etc. The third level of critical reflection involves the questioning of moral, ethical, and other types of normative criteria related directly and indirectly to the classroom.

The concept of reflective teaching was propounded by Schon (1983). It was Schon (1983) who defined reflection in terms of its different types. Schon wrote extensively on the concept of reflection and many fields other than education draw from the theoretical insight given by him on the concept of reflection. Schon introduced the concepts of 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action'. Schon (1983) described reflection in action as the process of criticising one's initial understanding of a phenomenon, constructing a new description of it, and testing the new description by an on-the-spot experiment. When the practitioner has left the playing field and mentally reconstructs that playing field to analyse actions and events, reflection on action takes place (Giovannelli, 2003, p. 293).

Schon, while giving the concept of reflection in action also talked about 'knowing in action' and explained how one is related to the other. Knowing in action is related to the phenomenon that while doing something we are also working as agents through whom the action is done. So, we are already in possession of the skills, knowledge and judgments that help us to execute that action. 'Knowing in action' is our ability which is tacitly woven in the action itself. It is internalised knowledge of the way we do something.

Moving one step ahead of this knowing is the step of being able to reflect on this knowing. When doing a task intuitively (through the way of

knowing in action) sometimes it leads to 'surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflection in action (Pollard, 2002).' It is thinking about something when we are still on the task of doing it. The practitioner of different profession take number of decisions while still in the process of act and decide on many aspects. It is then that the 'reflection in action' is taking place.

When the teacher recalls analyses and reflects on the processes of a class and tries to evolve a better plan or analyse the happenings of the class, the teacher is said to be involved into the process of reflection on action. So reflection in action is more quick, simultaneous and executable than 'reflection on action'.

Schon (1983, 1987, 1989) actually criticised the dominant technical rationality and proposed that an element of artistry can be brought in education with the use of reflection in action and reflection for action. (Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1991)

Tabachnick and Zeichner (1991) though value the pioneer work of Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983) in the field of reflective practice but eventually makes the point that even these proposed views about reflection are somewhat problematic. They raise the question on the ambiguity of what teachers should reflect on, kinds of criteria which are important in the process of reflection and upto what degree should the criticism of an organisation done by the workers in the same should be accepted.

They make a critique of Schon's concept of 'reflection in action' stating that it may sound good but it is not really clear what reflection in action looks like. It is something that rests in abstraction and doesn't get recognised as teacher behaviour. They mentioned that just thinking about teaching may not be same as reflecting on teaching.

They made an important contribution when they said that "Instead of focusing on whether the teacher is reflective or not, the focus should be on the nature and purpose of teachers' reflection. What are teacher being reflective about and why?"

They instigate the concept of reflective teaching as a social activity. Reflection is not merely social in its content, that is, in a concern to interpret the behaviour and social interaction of students, teachers, community members, or to anticipate future social behaviour. Reflection is itself a form of social interaction, it is carried as through a dialogue of words or action with other participants in the teaching learning context or else it is a symbolic dialogue in which the teacher anticipate and invents the reactions of students, colleagues and other, using this symbolic dialogue as critique of proposed interpretations and places for future actions (Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1991, p.16).

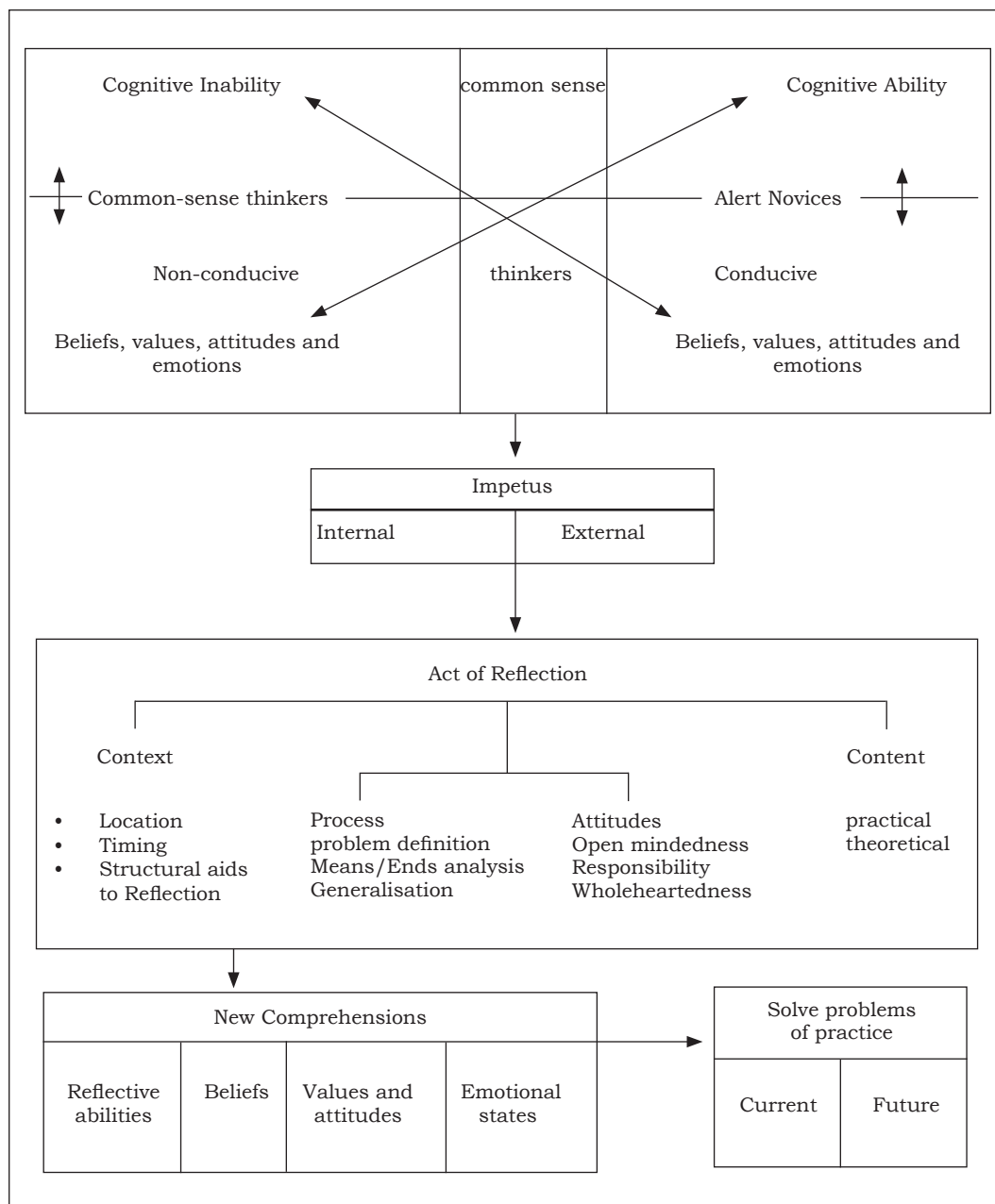
Zeichner and Liston (1990) proposed four different types of reflective practices which were derived after making a careful study

of analysis of reform in twentieth century US teacher education (Pollard, 2002).

1. an academic version lays emphasis on the subject matter, its delivery and subsequent effective student learning.
2. a social efficiency version stresses the thoughtful selection and application of appropriate teaching strategies that have proven to be effective according to the researches.
3. a developmentalist version that makes learners its sole focus point giving way to students' inclinations, interest, abilities and patterns of developmental growth.
4. a social reconstructionist version rests on the premise that all educational decision and actions are rooted in political and cultural ethos. It looks at education in general and school as institutions in particular to address the issues in society; e.g. gender equity, equal access to resources, social justice and so on.

A Renewed Conceptual Framework for Reflection in Pre-service Teacher Education

After having explored the generic definitions and conceptions of 'reflection' in the previous section, this sub section describes the extensive framework of LaBosky (1993) and adds a new dimension on understanding 'reflection' in pre-service teacher education.



Adopted from LaBosky (1993, p. 28)

LaBoskey, as an Assistant director of the Stanford Teacher Education Programme (1993) got involved in an extensive exercise of reviewing literature and studies done on reflection in an effort to design and implement a reflective teacher education programme and also wanted to evaluate the result of those efforts. Following his finding that there was no single comprehensive definition or framework for reflection, he explicated a 'new' framework on reflection and thus gave a new, comprehensive and robust definition of reflection in pre-service teacher education. His own studies done in the field of reflection (using spontaneous reflectivity, case investigation, questionnaires, interviews of student-teachers and supervisors, journals, free writing reaction to various educational experiences, course papers and projects) in pre-service teacher education gave him insight to develop the framework.

This framework is important as it places the concept of 'reflection' specifically in pre-service teacher education and it put forth some very significant aspects related to 'reflection in pre-service teacher education' which are distinct from the other works available on reflection. There is a more specific portrayal of the terms 'common sense thinkers' and 'Alert novices'; thus taking into consideration that even before coming to teacher education programmes individuals differ in their abilities to reflect. It asserts that cognitive ability

of analysis, synthesis and evaluation; and beliefs, values, emotions and attitudes both are important for engaging in reflective practices. Throughout the framework, the focus is on the individual instances rather than the act of reflection in general owing to the internal abilities and the propensities of the teacher that they bring with them while joining a Teacher Education Programme (TEP). The framework also marks a difference between internal impetus; i.e. internal motivation to reflect and external impetus; i.e. externally imposed tasks asking to reflect in TEP. There is a more direct incorporation and treatment of the context, process and content of the reflection. Timing, location and structural aids for promoting reflection such as research like tasks, seminar discussions, artifacts and partners or observers have been emphasised. Practical and theoretical both content are required for increasing reflective ability in teachers. Attitudes of open mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness are considered vital and are thus given a central space in reflective thinking in this framework. Process to reflection which was previously thought as occurring in a sequential order (first problem identification, then means/end analysis and finally generalisation) was revised. The new insight is that though all steps are indicative of reflective thinking, but all may not be used in each act of reflection. Under the area of

‘content’, each act of reflection might well include practical/theoretical, social/political and moral/ethical arguments. Pre-service teachers need to be encouraged to reflect on as many domains as possible both in practical and theoretical areas of the curriculum. Finally the framework explains the potential outcomes of reflective thinking differently. New comprehensions indicate that the common-sense thinkers have progressed and there is a change in the dimensions that originally distinguished them from alert novices. New comprehension is an improved ability to carry out an act of reflection.

Thus, it can be deduced that this framework presented a holistic understanding of reflection in teacher education and added many new dimensions.

REFLECTIVE ABILITY AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

The concept of ‘reflection’ has been into the light for past many decades. There have been discourses about reflection. Moreover, efforts have been made to introduce and integrate reflection into the practice of teacher education. The increased number of publications in the form of research papers, textbooks, and journals in the field of reflective practice are an indicator of the growing relevance of this field. Pollard (2008) elaborates on many positive aspects of reflective teaching. Reflective teaching ensures high quality teaching and subsequent

good student learning. Personally it is fulfilling for the teachers. Evidence informed reflection makes an important contribution throughout professional life and is important at all levels of teaching career. Reflective practices which are very much desirable for teachers emerge from the use of reflection. “The term reflective practice refers to the on the job performance resulting from using a reflective process for daily decision making and problem solving” (Larrivee, 2008, p. 341-342).

Dimova and Lougrahn, (2009) writes how “During the 1950s the push for practitioners to be more reflective grew and was taken up in many of the professions, especially teaching, as the theoretical aspects of reflective thinking began to take hold through teacher preparation (Borrowman, 1956)” (p.207). However, Kaasila and Lauriala (2012) assert that the much talked about concept of reflection has still not been able to find adequate place in TEP. Once the theoretical concept of reflection begins to get applied in the practical ways, the breadth and depth of teachers’ reflection can be better understood.

Cavanagh and Prescott (2010) assert that the “pre-service teachers often either do not reflect on their practice (Alger, 2006; Shoffner, 2008) or do so in a superficial way (Bean and Stevens, 2002; Collier, 1999). Instead, they focus mainly on the technical skills of teaching (Le Cornu and Ewing, 2008) and

practical concerns, such as planning and classroom management (Moore, 2003; Nyaumwe, 2004)” (p.148). However, the aim should be that both prospective and practicing teachers should continually progress through the levels of reflective thinking in order to ultimately intertwine the component of reflection with their day to day practices. Reflection ultimately rests on the premise of careful consideration of one’s own thoughts, assumptions, teaching choices and actions (Larrivee, 2008).

Just like any other skill, reflection is also learnt and it can flourish with active efforts made on the part of the practitioner. Larrivee (2008) shared that “without carefully constructed guidance, prospective and novice, as well as more experienced teachers seem unable to engage in pedagogical and critical reflection to enhance their practice.” (p.345)

A good number of research studies conducted in the field of reflection in pre-service teacher education in last three decades describe the inclusion of certain components in teacher education curriculum that promote reflective thinking in student-teachers.

(i) Mediations to Promote Reflective Ability in Pre-service Teachers

Wideen et al. (1998, cited in Walkington, 2005) quotes “The combination of intuitive and reflective practice assists pre-service teachers to make decisions confidently rather

than reverting to some long held belief (or fall back position) when challenged with a difficult situation” (p. 62).

Kaasila and Lauriala (2012) bring their focus to reflection in terms of its breadth and depth. Reflection in itself is not sufficient if the pre-service teachers are not trained to reflect about a broader area of concerns and actions. Reflection should be based on personal, cognitive and moral aspects of teaching (breadth of reflection).

Van Manen’s (1977) stages of reflection namely; technical, practical and critical are good indicators of depth of reflection. “If the goal is to deepen and broaden pre-service teachers’ reflections, the reflection processes should focus not only on the lessons but also on wider and multiple contexts” (Kaasila and Lauriala, 2012, p. 86). Elaborating on the same they put forth the findings that the research reading context seemed to deepen reflection. However, experiences such as autobiographical writings seemed to enhance the breadth of reflection.

Pre-service teachers view the peer and collaborative feedback as both uplifting and helpful. Peer feedback was appreciated as valuable for professional learning in relation to the core skill being rehearsed, and in its value as a means of preparing them for entry into the teaching profession (Auhl, Hastings and Daniel, 2013). Britzman (1986 cited in Kaasila and Lauriala, 2012) talks about the importance of collective reflection and action in teacher education and

also stresses that such practices of collective and collaborative efforts is not prevalent in teacher education programmes.

Practices such as social memoir writing (Braun and Crumpler, 2004), personal biographies in the form of dialogue journal writing (Bean, Herrick, Zulich, 1992), aided and prompted reflection (Griffin, 1997) can develop reflective skills in student-teachers and in particular the practice of reflective journal writing can promote autonomy and decision-making skill (Genc, 2010) and self-efficacy (Tan, 2013) in prospective teachers. In the literature special emphasis is laid on the way reflection is enacted as a part of the discursive contexts that student-teachers find themselves in. So reflection is viewed as a strongly rooted phenomenon in the social context (Ovens and Tinning, 2009; Lee, 2005). However, at the same time efforts should be made on the part of teacher educators to include different forms of writing tasks to promote reflection in prospective teachers and to lessen the extensive writing works demanded from pre-service teachers in the name of reflective assignments. (Pedro, 2005)

The importance of dedicating sufficient time, reflecting on practice, empowering decision-making and learning through research in action is strongly recognised as means to promote a positive and personally meaningful teacher identity. Mentoring, rather than supervision,

by the experienced teacher promotes a collegial relationship that fosters each individual pre-service teacher to develop his/her own identity as a professional teacher (Alkington, 2010, p. 63).

Programmes preparing teachers for teaching at different levels of education should be organised in such a manner so as to optimise the development of reflective ability in teachers. One research study conducted on relationship between Reflective Disposition toward Teaching and Effective Teaching concluded that reflective disposition is related to effective teaching especially in the domains of instructional behaviour, classroom organisation, and teacher expectations. An important implication of this study is support for the inclusion of activities and experiences in teacher preparation programs that foster future teachers' abilities to reflect on, analyse, and critique their work (Giovannelli, 2003).

Reflection has gained much impetus in TEP and student-teachers value reflection (Alger, 2006) and exhibit willingness and excitement to continue with reflective practices further (Griffin, 1997).

(ii) Barriers to Reflection

A thorough understanding of different barriers to reflection can pave way for better reflective experiences. Kaasila and Lauriala (2012) explains that these barriers could be previous negative experiences,

lack of motivation, lack of time, the expectations of others and the self, and fear of failure. Clarke (2011) carried out a research study to better understand the ways to achieve the goal of enhanced reflective skills on the part of the student-teachers especially in large group teaching contexts. It is realised that it becomes specially challenging to impart such skills to the prospective when dealing with large group of student-teachers. Clarke (2011) however made use of 'reflective verbalisation' as a strategy for promoting reflection in pre-service teachers. A sketchy teacher education curriculum, ineffective teacher educators, short duration of teacher education programmes, interfering institutional ethos also stand as barriers to bring the culture of reflection in teacher education.

CONCLUSION

Reflective ability is a developable attribute and a TEP must be in cognizance with the reflective model of teacher education. Research studies done in the field of teacher education have proposed different mediations that can promote reflective ability in prospective teachers. To include or highlight the reflective component in TEP are no more considered as good additions but the field of 'reflection' has emerged as the core value that a TEP

should thrive upon if its objective is to create effective practitioners.

There is corpus of literature on 'reflection'; beginning from generic theoretical explanations to efforts to condense (LaBoskey, 1993 and Larrivee, 2008) the concept of 'reflection' specially in pre-service teacher education programmes is indicative of the complex phenomenon of 'reflection'. Owing to the complexity and at the same time the desirability of interweaving 'reflection' in teacher education, it becomes immensely important that teacher education curriculum give clear guidelines on how to include reflective practices in teacher education.

A pre-service teacher education programme is a very important professional qualification that prospective teachers undergo. Recent formative changes in the field of education like RTE, CCE, and professional code of ethics make demands on the part of the teachers to become reflective practitioners. The TEP are entrusted with the task of creating effective and reflective prospective teachers and the plausible way to do so is to make 'reflection' the guiding force in a TEP.

There is a growing need especially in Indian context to draw from the intensive work done in the field of 'reflection' and to use it to inform the teacher education practices.

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