

NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF TEACHING PRACTICUM: A SELF-REFLECTIVE JOURNEY OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges and prospects experienced by prospective teachers during their self-reflective journey in the teaching practicum. The primary objective was to examine how engagement in structured reflective practices specifically teacher and peer observations and self-reflective dialogue journals shaped their pedagogical understanding and professional growth. The central research question guiding this inquiry was: How do prospective teachers experience and interpret their self-reflective journey during teaching practicum in terms of challenges and developmental outcomes? Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six prospective teachers who participated in a teaching practicum. Thematic analysis revealed that participants initially encountered challenges such as limited time for reflection, peer dynamics, classroom diversity, integration of technology and difficulty in linking theoretical concepts with classroom realities. Over time, however, they reported positive transformations including enhanced confidence, adaptability, critical thinking, and professional identity formation. The study concludes that reflective practices act as catalysts for professional maturity and deeper pedagogical insight. It recommends embedding systematic reflective frameworks guided journaling, mentoring, and peer dialogue within teacher education programs to foster sustainable reflective habits and bridge the theory–practice gap in teacher preparation.

Keywords: *self-reflection; teaching practicum; prospective teachers; reflective practice; critical thinking*

INTRODUCTION

The teaching practicum is widely recognized as a pivotal period in teacher education: an arena where theory meets the complex, relational reality of classrooms. For many prospective teachers, the practicum is both exciting and unsettling: it offers a chance to enact pedagogical ideas but also exposes novices to unanticipated student responses, classroom dynamics, and practical constraints. Reflection, in this context, serves as a professional habit of mind that enables prospective teachers to make sense of their experiences, interrogate assumptions, and refine their pedagogical practices (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). Through reflection, teachers learn to connect theory with practice, transform uncertainty into inquiry, and develop the professional resilience needed to handle real classroom situations.

However, reflection is not an automatic process. It requires time, scaffolding, and dialogic support to progress from mere description of events toward interpretive and critical analysis of teaching (Vygotsky, 1978). Meaningful reflection demands that teachers move beyond recounting what happened to exploring why it happened and how

future teaching can be improved. Research has shown that guided reflection through journals, peer feedback, and mentoring helps prospective teachers deepen their understanding of learners, refine instructional strategies, and develop stronger professional identities (Farrell, 2021; Korthagen & Timmermans, 2022). Yet, in many teacher education programs, reflective practice remains underdeveloped, often limited to superficial self-reports or end-of-lesson summaries without systematic support or assessment.

The teaching practicum, particularly in developing contexts such as Pakistan, presents unique challenges that complicate reflective growth. Overcrowded classrooms, rigid curricula, limited mentorship, and examination-driven systems often leave little space for genuine reflection (Rahman, et. al. 2023; Zulfqar & Ali, 2024). Prospective teachers frequently struggle to bridge the gap between theoretical coursework and the realities of classroom instruction. While global literature has established the benefits of reflective practice, few local studies have explored how prospective teachers experience the process of becoming reflective within their practicum environments how they negotiate feedback, manage time, and transform reflective insights into action (Bugti et.al. 2024)

This gap underscores the dire need to understand reflection not merely as a theoretical construct but as a lived process shaped by institutional, social, and emotional factors. The current study, therefore, investigates the challenges and prospects of the self-reflective journey of prospective teachers during their teaching practicum. Grounded in sociocultural perspectives of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), it explores how dialogue, peer interaction, and mentoring mediate reflective growth. By centring the voices of twelve prospective teachers, this study aims to contribute nuanced insights into how reflection can be cultivated within teacher education programs to foster adaptive, inclusive, and professionally resilient educators. Ultimately, it highlights reflection as a transformative process one that turns the teaching practicum from a test of performance into a journey of self-understanding and pedagogical evolution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflection has long been recognised as a cornerstone of teacher education and professional development, shaping how educators understand and refine their teaching practices. Dewey (1933) first conceptualized reflection as an active, deliberate process of examining beliefs and actions in light of their consequences. He emphasized that reflective thinking enables teachers to transform routine action into intelligent practice. Building on this foundation, Schön (1983) introduced the notion of the reflective practitioner, distinguishing between reflection-in-action thinking that occurs while teaching and reflection-on-action analysis that follows an event. These classical perspectives continue to underpin modern approaches to teacher education, providing a theoretical lens to understand how prospective teachers evolve into reflective practitioners during their practicum.

In recent years, scholars have examined how structured reflective tools such as guided journals, mentoring, and peer observation enhance professional learning among pre-service teachers. Lama et al., (2023) demonstrated that guided reflective journals serve as effective tools for self-assessment, enabling pre-service teachers to identify gaps in their teaching and plan for improvement. Similarly, Gläser-Zikuda et al., (2024) found

that when reflective writing is supported through formative feedback and mentoring, student teachers progress from descriptive narration to deeper analytic reflection, often-linking classroom experiences to pedagogical theory. Such studies emphasize that reflection must be intentional and scaffolded; otherwise, it risks remaining superficial or mechanical. There is limited empirical evidence exploring how reflection develops in authentic classroom environments where time constraints, curricular demands, and emotional stress influence reflective engagement.

Peer observation has gained increasing attention as a collaborative tool that fosters reflection through dialogue and shared experience. Mouraz et al., (2023) found that peer observation promotes professional learning communities, encouraging prospective teachers to exchange constructive feedback and develop metacognitive awareness of teaching practices. Likewise, Iraola et al., (2024) highlighted that when peer observation is embedded in teacher preparation programs, it nurtures mutual trust and reflective dialogue. Yu and Li (2022) added that peer collaboration could challenge personal biases and expand pedagogical repertoires by exposing teachers to diverse strategies. However, these benefits often depend on institutional culture and mentor engagement. In hierarchical or exam-oriented educational contexts, feedback exchanges may become evaluative rather than developmental, limiting open reflection.

Consequently, understanding how peer feedback and observation operate in culturally diverse and resource-constrained environments remains an essential area for exploration. Despite growing recognition of the value of reflection, numerous studies reveal persistent challenges that hinder its depth and effectiveness. Ottesen and Anderson (2021) observed that time pressure, heavy teaching loads, and inadequate mentorship constrain prospective teachers' ability to engage in sustained reflection. In many teacher education institutions, reflection is treated as a formal requirement rather than a meaningful process of inquiry. Within the Pakistani context, Rahman et al., (2023) described that reflective practice is often overlooked due to rigid curriculum structures, lack of institutional support, and a focus on examination results. Similarly, Zulfqar and Ali (2024) found that pre-service teachers frequently engage in descriptive reflection without connecting their insights to theory or classroom improvement. These findings underscore the practical and systemic barriers that limit reflection's potential highlighting the need for contextually sensitive approaches that make reflection both feasible and transformative within teacher training programs.

While these challenges persist, the literature also illuminates the positive outcomes that reflection can yield when properly supported. Farrell (2021) demonstrated that consistent engagement in reflection strengthens teachers' professional identities and enhances their confidence in decision-making. Korthagen and Timmermans (2022) argued that reflection not only improves pedagogical competence but also fosters emotional resilience and adaptability these qualities are essential in today's dynamic classrooms. Similarly, Smith and Flores (2023) reported that prospective teachers who engaged in guided journaling during practicum developed greater empathy toward students and began to view reflection as a core element of their professional growth rather than an imposed task. These studies collectively affirm that reflection can transform teaching from a technical exercise into a deeply personal and moral pursuit,

nurturing teachers who are thoughtful, responsive, and inclusive in their practice (Akram & Mehmood, 2023).

Contemporary perspectives on teacher reflection increasingly emphasise integrating cognitive, emotional, moral, and sociocultural aspects of professional learning (Korthagen & Timmermans, 2022). Emotional reflection enables teachers to acknowledge feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and accomplishment that accompany teaching experiences, while critical reflection urges them to question systemic inequities and cultural assumptions embedded in schooling (Farrell, 2021). Although international research has begun to explore these dimensions (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2024; Smith & Flores, 2023), there is a paucity of empirical work in South Asian contexts that captures reflection as a lived process involving thought, emotion, and action. By focusing on the lived experiences of prospective teachers in Pakistan, this study contributes to a richer understanding of how reflection functions as both a cognitive and emotional tool for professional transformation. It aims to uncover how structured reflection, peer observation, and reflective journaling together enable novice teachers to navigate challenges, construct meaning, and cultivate their pedagogical and professional identities within the realities of classroom life.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the self-reflective journeys of prospective teachers during their teaching practicum. The design provided an opportunity to understand the lived, context-based experiences of participants within authentic school settings (Yin, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Six prospective teachers enrolled in the B.Ed. (Hons.) programme at a public university in Pakistan participated in this study. Participants were purposively selected based on their achievement scores in the practicum, ensuring inclusion of high, Average and low achievers. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting.

Instrument and Trustworthiness

Data were collected by using a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit participants' reflective experiences, perceived challenges, and personal growth during the practicum. To ensure the content validity the interview guide, three teacher education experts reviewed the instrument. Trustworthiness strengthened through data triangulation with reflective journals and observation notes, maintaining an audit trail, and using peer debriefing to confirm interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place at the end of the practicum once participants had completed their school placements. The selected participants were interviewed to explore their views about the teaching practicum experiences. Each interview persisted 45–60 minutes and encouraged open, conversational reflection on their teaching experiences, feedback interactions, and moments of learning. All interviews were conducted in a comfortable setting. All the data were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

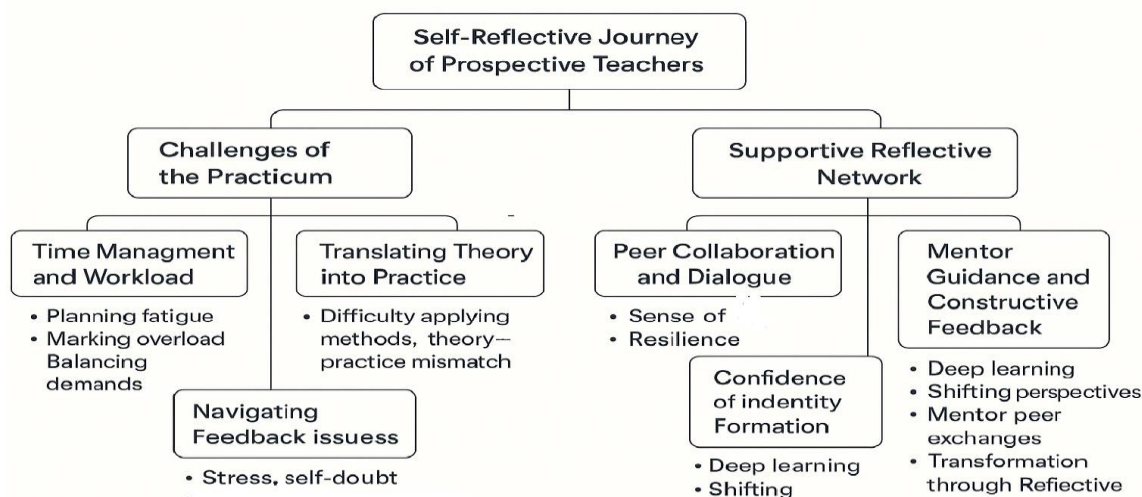
DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed systematically using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step coding framework supported by NVivo 12 software. In the open (initial) coding phase, the transcripts were read line by line to identify key concepts representing participants' reflections, emotions, and experiences. During axial coding, related concepts were connected into broader categories by exploring relationships among conditions, actions, and consequences. For example, codes related to time pressure, mentor feedback, and peer support were integrated under broader categories such as "Challenges of the Practicum Context" and "Supportive Reflective Networks." Finally, in the selective coding stage, these categories were synthesised into core themes that captured the overarching narrative of the study: (1) Navigating Practicum Complexities through Reflection, (2) Peer and Mentor Support as Catalysts for Reflective Growth, and (3) Reflection as a Pathway to Professional Identity Formation.

The integration of these stages ensured that analysis remained grounded in participants' voices while developing an interpretive understanding of their self-reflective transformation. The use of NVivo 12 enhanced the accuracy, organisation, and traceability of data throughout the process.

Figure 1

**Navigating Challenges and Prospects of Teaching Practicum:
A Self-Reflective Journey of Prospective Teachers**



FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews of six prospective teachers enrolled in a B.Ed. (Hons) programme. The analysis, based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework of initial, axial, and selective coding, revealed two overarching themes: Challenges of the Practicum and Supportive Reflective Networks. Each theme encompasses several subthemes illustrating the participants' self-reflective journeys, including both the constraints they encountered and the opportunities that nurtured professional growth.

Theme 1: Challenges of the Practicum

1.1 Managing Time and Workload

Most participants reported that time management was their greatest struggle during the practicum. Balancing lesson planning, classroom delivery, marking, and reflective journaling often proved overwhelming. Reflection was sometimes rushed due to fatigue or competing demands.

“After teaching all day and preparing for the next, I felt drained. Reflection became something I did quickly rather than thoughtfully” (PT1).

Such comments reflect how workload pressures constrained deep reflection, turning it into a procedural rather than a reflective act.

1.2 Bridging Theory and Practice

Many participants found it difficult to translate theoretical knowledge into classroom realities. While their coursework had equipped them with sound pedagogical frameworks, the unpredictable classroom environment demanded adaptive and situational decision-making.

“What we studied sounded perfect in theory, but real classrooms don’t go as planned. I had to think on my feet and reflect after each lesson.” (PT3)

This realisation highlighted how reflective thinking became a bridge between idealised teaching concepts and practical classroom enactment.

1.3 Emotional and Psychological Strain

Participants described feeling anxious and self-conscious under observation. Fear of being judged often undermined confidence, particularly in the early weeks of practicum.

“When my mentor walked in, I got nervous. Even if I was doing fine, I couldn’t focus properly because I was afraid of being criticised.” (PT5)

However, over time, reflection helped them understand and manage these emotions, turning discomfort into professional resilience.

1.4 Receiving and Responding to Feedback

At the start, several participants admitted feeling defensive towards feedback, particularly when offered by peers. Gradually, they learned to see feedback as a developmental rather than judgmental tool.

“Initially, I felt hurt when peers pointed out my weaknesses. Later, I realised they were helping me improve” (PT6).

This shift from resistance to acceptance signified growing reflective maturity and openness to collaborative learning.

Theme 2: Supportive Reflective Network

2.1 Peer Collaboration and Shared Reflection

Over time, participants found strength in peer discussions and shared reflections. These exchanges provided emotional support and diverse perspectives on teaching challenges.

“Listening to others made me feel I wasn’t alone. We shared our worries but also our small victories it made reflection more real.” (PT2)

Through these collaborative spaces, reflection evolved from an isolated task into a dialogic and communal process.

2.2 Role of Mentors and Supervisors

Mentors played a vital role in facilitating reflective growth. Their guidance helped participants to interpret classroom experiences, frame problems constructively, and identify actionable steps.

“My mentor didn’t just tell me what went wrong; she asked me why I thought it happened. That made me reflect deeply and plan differently next time” (PT4).

Such scaffolding encouraged prospective teachers to think critically about their pedagogical choices and refine practice iteratively.

2.3 Growth in Reflective Awareness and Professional Identity

Through consistent engagement in reflective activities, participants gradually developed professional confidence and autonomy. They began to see themselves as capable, evolving teachers rather than uncertain novices.

“At first, I doubted myself constantly. Now I see myself as a teacher who can learn, adapt, and make informed decisions” (PT5).

Reflection became an empowering tool for identity construction and professional ownership.

2.4 Reflection as Action and Transformation

By the end of the practicum, participants began applying their reflective insights directly to improve classroom practice. Reflection thus moved beyond self-analysis to purposeful action.

“When students lost interest, I recalled my earlier reflection and changed my strategy mid-lesson. Reflection turned into action.” (PT3)

This ability to transform reflective insight into responsive teaching represented the pinnacle of reflective growth observed in this study.

The findings revealed a dynamic interplay between challenges and prospects within the reflective journeys of prospective teachers. While initial struggles such as workload stress, emotional anxiety, and theory-practice gaps tested their endurance, these experiences also prompted deeper engagement with reflection. Supported by mentors and peers, participants transformed reflective thinking into a habit of professional inquiry, thereby nurturing confidence, adaptability, and a sense of agency as future educators.

Discussion

This study explored how self-reflective practices shaped prospective teachers’ growth during their teaching practicum. The findings revealed that reflection was not an automatic process but one that evolved gradually through experience, support, and dialogue. At the start, most participants viewed reflection as a formal task; but at the end, it became a meaningful habit that helped them understand themselves as teachers and make informed classroom decisions.

The practicum presented challenges heavy workload, limited time, emotional stress, and difficulty applying theory to practice. These pressures often made reflection feel burdensome, yet they also encouraged deeper thinking once participants began reflecting purposefully. This process echoed Dewey’s (1933) idea of reflection as thoughtful inquiry and Schön’s (1983) concept of reflection-in-action, where teachers learn by rethinking their actions in real situations. Peer discussions and mentor feedback played a vital role in supporting reflection. Sharing experiences reduced stress, built confidence, and encouraged open dialogue reflection Vygotsky’s (1978) views that

learning grows through social interaction. Reflective notes and discussions also helped participants track their progress and recognise changes in their attitudes and teaching styles (Jones & Ryan, 2014). Technology integration was both a hurdle and an opportunity. While technical issues and lack of training limited its use, digital tools like online journals allowed collaboration and new ways of sharing reflection (Zahid & Khanam, 2019). Similarly, the practicum's institutional constraints reminded participants that reflection thrives best when supported by time, guidance, and a positive school culture (Suphasri, 2021).

In the end, reflection transformed participants' thinking. They began to see challenges as learning opportunities and teaching as an ongoing journey rather than a fixed performance. This supports Mezirow's (2009) view that reflection can lead to personal and professional transformation. Despite obstacles, the practicum became a space where reflection nurtured resilience, confidence, and a stronger sense of teacher identity (Heinz, 2024).

Conclusions

This study illuminated the complex yet transformative nature of the self-reflective journey undertaken by prospective teachers during their teaching practicum. Through their interviews, it became evident that reflection was not merely a technical exercise but a deeply personal and developmental process. The practicum served as both a challenge and an opportunity where limited resources, time constraints, feedback tensions, and classroom management anxieties coexisted with meaningful learning, growing confidence, and evolving teacher identities. Despite facing difficulties in integrating technology, navigating peer dynamics, and translating theory into practice, participants demonstrated increasing self-awareness and adaptability as the practicum progressed. Their reflective engagement helped them question their assumptions, refine their teaching approaches, and value collaborative feedback as a powerful tool for professional growth. The findings reaffirm that structured reflective opportunities such as guided journals, peer and mentor dialogues, and observation debriefs can transform the practicum into a genuine site of learning rather than a ritual of evaluation. Teacher education programmes should embed reflection systematically within practicum design by providing time, scaffolding, and supportive feedback to nurture reflection not only as a habit of mind but fostering resilience, empathy, and lifelong learning among prospective teachers.

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