

## BETWEEN SELF-CRITICISM AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: HOW STUDENT TEACHERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION CONSTRUCT REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN PUNJAB

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### Abstract

*Reflective practice is generally embraced in the teacher education systems but there are limited studies on how student teachers in special education programmes in Pakistan construct reflective practice. This qualitative study examined the ways in which student teachers in Initial Teacher Education (Special Education) programmes in the Punjab province construct reflective practice in the light of competing pressures of criticism and development. Based on semi-structured interviews with twenty participants and analysing the data using the framework of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the research developed three themes: The Weight of Looking Inward, Navigating Institutional and Cultural Constraints, and Glimpsing Professional Growth Through Relational Reflection. The results suggest that student teachers oscillate between productive self-reflection and debilitating self-criticism shaped by the structural and cultural conditions of special education training in Punjab. The study contributes a contextualised account of how reflective practice is understood and enacted in a setting that remains under-researched and has implications for curriculum design and practice by teacher educators.*

**Keywords:** Reflective Practice, Special Education, Initial Teacher Education, Critical Reflection, Punjab, Pakistan, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

### 1. Introduction

Reflective practice has been a central concern in teacher education over the past three decades (Schön, 1991). The main claim, advanced most prominently by Schön (1991), is that teachers who reflect on their practice develop more adaptive, responsive, and ethically grounded professional identities. In a wide range of pedagogical settings, reflection has been put in place as a means of bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge gained in the course of training and the concrete realities of classroom practice (Larivee, 2000). Within higher education, the role of critical reflection within teaching has been described as a purposeful process enabling student practitioners to identify and negotiate complex ethical and professional challenges in a professionally and ethically competent manner (Smith, 2011).

In teacher education, a substantial body of literature demonstrates that reflective practice is not a unitary concept but takes multiple forms serving different professional purposes (Smith, 2011). The four types of reflection identified by Smith (2011) each target distinct dimensions of professional learning and have different roles in learning about the profession and function in an integrated manner to support professional learning (Brookfield, 1987; Smith, 2011). The capacity to move beyond surface self-monitoring into contextual and critical reflection is what distinguishes reflective teachers, which makes critically reflective teachers stand out from those who treat reflective activities as procedural compliance only (Larivee, 2008). Research consistently shows that pre-service educators who engage in deeper-

level reflection show more ability to develop professionally and innovate pedagogically (Aslam et al., 2021).

The field of special education places particular demands on reflective capacity. Student teachers preparing to work with learners with disabilities have to negotiate not only the usual issues of working in the classroom but also distinctive ethical dilemmas related to the inclusion, labelling, normalisation, and the exercise of professional power over vulnerable groups of students (Smith, 2011). In Pakistan, the special education sector operates within a historically underfunded, structurally fragmented system of Initial Teacher Education. This marginalisation introduces a situation in which student teachers engaging in these programmes without adequate institutional support for reflective practice development.

Although reflective practice is acknowledged as a significant teaching education practice in the global community, research studies reveal a persistent discrepancy between rhetorical commitment to reflection and its enactment in training programmes between the rhetorical commitment to embedding reflection in teacher education programmes (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Loughran, 2002; O'Donoghue & Brooker, 1996). Research on teacher education in Pakistan suggests that critical reflection at advanced stages is not well acknowledged or valued in most training programmes, whereby this reduction of reflection to procedural tasks is associated with lack of challenging student teachers with framing assumptions at educational levels (Khan et al., 2006). The varied experiences of student teachers in special education Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes in Punjab have not been systematically investigated. In the Pakistani literature on reflective practice, the available literature has mostly covered mainstream schooling environments, secondary or higher general education, and in-service teachers. In Punjab, the area marked by the intersection of special education, primary teacher preparation and critical reflective practice is relatively unexplored.

Moreover, the conflict between self-criticism and professional development that Smith (2011) cites as the significant yet under-examined tension between self-criticism and professional development has not been explored in this context (Smith, 2011). A genuine risk exists that, unless theoretically grounded, student teachers in special education programmes can find the process of reflection to be a self-regulatory burden which results in what Boud and Walker (1998) describe as inward-looking rather than growth-oriented reflection. How this tension is negotiated by student teachers and under what conditions it can either escalate or lessen in Punjab, and this question remains unaddressed in the Punjab special education context.

The research explored how student teachers in the ITE (Special Education) programme in Punjab, Pakistan, build reflective practice, especially in the way they negotiate between self-criticism and professional development. The research was guided by two research questions. In the first question, what do student teachers specifically in ITE (Special Education) programmes within Punjab know about, and experience in reflective practice? Second, how do factors influence the patterns of movement between student teacher reflection that is based on self-criticism and reflective practice that is based on professional development? It contributes a contextualised empirical account of how reflective practice is constructed under institutional and cultural constraints in a geographically and institutionally unique setting.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Reflective Practice: Conceptual Foundations and Purpose*

This idea of reflective practice has a conceptual framework based on foundational theoretical and pedagogical contributions in teacher education. The epistemological foundations of reflection were established by Dewey (1933) when he developed reflection as a disciplined inquiry that started with the doubt condition (Dewey, 1933). The difference between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action presented by Schön (1991) introduced a

temporal dimension that proved foundational for practitioner education. Mezirow (1994) built on this to include transformative learning, suggesting that critical reflection can be used to help learners to challenge and reconsider the assumptions underpinning their world-view and understanding of the world to a new level, on which they base their future world-understanding in turn (Mezirow, 1994). Collectively, these frameworks position reflective practice as purposeful, socially situated, and transformative.

To find four specific uses of critical reflection, Smith (2011) catalogues these traditions to define: the purpose of enhancing thinking, facilitating learning, self-evaluation, and scrutinising social systems (Smith, 2011). This model resists reducing reflection to solitary self-observation, emphasising its outward critical aspects. This risk is documented in the practitioner education literature. When ITE programmes introduce reflective practice as a set of techniques rather than theoretically grounded inquiry, student teachers tend to treat reflection as performance rather than critical inquiry (Larivee, 2008; Smith, 2011). This is particularly evident in ITE contexts with resource constraints, given that little emphasis is directed towards the theoretical foundation of the reflection.

### ***2.2 Self-Criticism, Emotional Labour, and the Limits of Reflection***

A substantial body of literature addresses the potentially adverse dimensions of reflective practice. According to Boud and Walker (1998), unless scaffolding is used systematically, reflection risks collapsing into self-centred critique that neither supports nor facilitates learning. Smith (2011) explains the danger of an infinite regress of contemplation concerning action, in which the very act of contemplating (or reflecting) ends up as the subject of anxious examination, resulting in impasse and not progress (Smith, 2011). When student teachers are labouring in emotionally charged backgrounds of special education, the demands of practice are magnified by the pedagogical, emotional, and ethical dimensions of working with disabled learners.

Self-critical reflection may undermine the still-forming professional identity of a novice teacher, especially in high-stakes situations (Larivee, 2000). Harsh self-evaluative orientations constitute barriers to professional learning and may skew the image of personal competence (Smith, 2011). Meanwhile, Brookfield (1987) suggests that critical reflection necessarily involves confronting professionally uncomfortable assumptions, as it not only requires confronting the assumptions that underpin professional security, often without the protection of established frameworks. The pedagogical challenge for ITE programmes is how to develop an environment that distinguishes productive discomfort from debilitating self-criticism (Thomassen et al., 2024). Research in the Pakistani teacher education setting indicates that this issue is scarcely discussed (Aslam et al., 2021).

### ***2.3 Reflective Practice in Pakistani Teacher Education***

The state of the literature on reflective practice in teacher education in Pakistan indicates that it is a field where significance is acknowledged but structural support remains limited. Research consistently identifies a gap between reflection as an ideal revealed in policy discourse and how the practice percolates into training programmes (Khan et al., 2006). Halai (2011) found that in-service teachers trained at the Aga Khan University IED in-service teachers who are first introduced to reflective practice struggle to move beyond surface description of practice toward analytical engagement with the conditions that shape it (Qureshi, 2001). Aslam et al. (2021) discovered that student teachers in a Pakistani teacher education programme did have their reflective capacity developed over time, since the development of reflective capacity required sustained, structured engagement rather than incidental exposure.

Reflective practice in Pakistan operates within cultural and institutional contexts that do not consistently favour questioning authority or bringing to prominence professional uncertainty, both of which play key roles in critical reflection. The special education sector in

Punjab also introduces additional layers of complexity: The isolation of special education by mainstream schooling, the stigma that disability has in most communities, and the shortage of mentored practicum placements all shape the conditions under which student teachers form their reflective identities. Such contextual peculiarities render it necessary to investigate the construction of reflective practice in this context on its own terms and rather than assume the transferability of findings from other national or institutional contexts.

#### ***2.4 Reflective Practice and Special Education Teacher Preparation***

Intersections between reflective practice and special education teacher preparation are a developing field of research. The unique ethical concerns that special educators must address present special education teachers with distinctive challenges in critical thinking: the ethics of professional power over vulnerable students, the ethics of labelling and categorisation, and managing complex relationships with families and the multi-professional team all present ongoing demands on critical thinking processes that demand special consideration of the role of reflection in upcoming practice (Smith, 2011). Within a constructivist approach, reflective practice is not merely a technical supplement to skills acquisition but rather a key element in shaping an ethically responsive professional identity (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The existing literature focuses predominantly on in-service teachers or generalist teacher education contexts, and there is little knowledge on the experience of the student teachers working in ITE (Special Education) programmes. Reflective practice at the beginning of training, when professional identities are not yet established, is formative and shapes how teachers approach professional learning across their careers (Larivee, 2008; Schön, 1991). The study of this process within the framework of the Punjab special education is thus both theoretically and practically important. The present study addresses this gap.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

It was based on the qualitative design where Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed as an analytic tool (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive TA was selected due to its theoretical flexibility but also aligned with the study's interest in how student teachers actively construct rather than passively receive understandings of reflective practice, based on a constructionist epistemological stance, which follows the idea of active construction too. In contrast to more formal approaches to qualitative research, Reflexive TA anticipates the role of the researcher in creating a meaning out of data, rather than the positivist assumption that themes pre-exist the analytic process as objective features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It aligns with what Braun and Clarke (2021) term Big Q qualitative research and considers qualitative studies as a paradigm separately and not as an addition to quantitative research.

#### ***3.2 Philosophical Paradigm***

The paper is placed in a constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998). Based on this stance, knowledge is understood as co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants in particular social and institutional contexts rather than a description of a mind-independent, pre-existing reality (Crotty, 1998; Willig, 2021). It also had an ontological relativist position in that the reflective practice experiences of student teachers are ontologically constituted through discourse, institutional structures, and interpersonal relations as opposed to merely manifesting predetermined psychological states. The approach to language used was constructionist: Participant accounts were not treated as transparent windows onto inner experience but as practices of meaning-making informed by the discourses of cultural and professional available at the time (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The paper assumes critical analytic orientation, where data were approached with critical analytic reflexivity, as opposed to empathic reproduction of the stated views of the participants.

### ***3.3 Analytic Approach***

It was an inductive and latent analysis. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than from predetermined frameworks, as opposed to themes being generated according to already existing frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, some deductive codes based on Smith (2011) were used as provisional codes, which were later refined as data analysis process continued. The latent focus implied that the analysis dealt with the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations that organised participant accounts not staying at the level of explicit content (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These decisions were in line with the study's constructionist paradigm and interest in the discursive construction of reflective practice, as opposed to its description.

### ***3.4 Participants and Sampling***

The study participants were recruited by means of purposive criterion sampling (Patton, 2014). Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in a recognised ITE (Special Education) programme in Punjab on the data collection date, have gone through at least one practicum placement, and be willing to share their reflections on the experiences of reflective practice in detail. Twenty student teachers volunteered in the ITE (Special Education) schools of Punjab. The sample size was sixteen women and four men aged between 21 and 34 years old. All had received one or more semesters of a supervised practicum in a special education school. The sample size was determined by the principle of information power, which ties adequacy to research focus, sample specificity, and data quality (Malterud et al., 2016) rather than saturation. With the unique nature of the research questions, the overall homogeneity of the sample based on programme and context, and the richness of the semi-structured interview approach, twenty participants yielded enough information to be rigorously analysed (Malterud et al., 2016).

### ***3.5 Data Collection***

The data were generated with semi-structured individual interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Specifically, as the theoretical paradigm, a Smith (2011) framework was considered and relied on in the synthesis of the interview guide based on the available literature on reflective practice in teacher education. The guide contained introductory questions about what the participants knew about reflective practice and then proceeded to probing questions about certain experiences encountered during practicum, their experiences of being self-critical, and their experiences of professional growth through reflection. The interviews were done in Urdu and English depending on the choice of the participant. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted face-to-face at the participants' choice of venue for interview. Participants gave their consent to have their audio recorded. An AI-assisted transcription tool (TurboScribe) was used to aid in transcription, and each transcript was reviewed by the research team to ensure accuracy and completeness, consistent with established guidance on AI-assisted transcription in qualitative research (Flick, 2022).

### ***3.6 Data Analysis Procedures***

The analysis was based on the six phases of the Reflexive TA outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021).

During Phase 1 (Familiarisation) the researchers read and re-read a number of times through all transcripts and initial analytic memos, noting recurring ideas, tensions and patterns across the data. This multiple engagement resulted in analytic immersion before coding.

During Phase 2 (Coding), the process involved initial coding of all the collected data. Codes were labelled with brief, meaningful categories that reflected both semantic (later literal) and latent meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). NVivo 15 was utilised to handle data and organise it, assisting in creating and maintaining the code system, accessing text, writing memos and thematic network visualisation. In line with the principles of Reflexive TA, NVivo was used

in the organisational process; all coding and interpretive decisions were made by the researcher (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). NVivo 15's AI-assisted coding function was used to generate a provisional code set, which the researcher then critically revised, and extended with continued work with the data. AI-generated codes were treated as prompts for further analysis rather than as analytical findings.

Phase 3 (Generating Initial Themes) involved clustering codes around core conceptual ideas to generate candidate themes. It also involved constructing initial thematic maps to explore possible relationships between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Phase 4 (Developing and Reviewing Themes) entailed mapping candidate themes with both coded extracts and all data and revising themes that lacked coherence across the dataset or failed to support a clear analytic narrative. Phase 5 (Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes) encompassed writing theme definitions that provided the overarching organising concept of each theme and coming up with analytically accurate naming. Phase 6 (Writing Up) was about the analytic narrative writing with data extracts and the researcher's analytic voice and interpretive position were made explicit throughout the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Braun et al., 2019).

NVivo 15 was the CAQDAS platform used for data management. Certain functions that were utilised are code system development and management, text retrieval and organisation, memo writing to provide analytical notes and visual mapping of theme relationships. The software supported the organisation of a large and complex dataset, as it did not produce the analysis. The researcher made analytical decisions at each stage, and NVivo was used as an organisational frame for analytical decisions at each stage (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

### ***3. Trustworthiness and Quality***

Quality was assessed using criteria appropriate to Big Q qualitative research of Big Q research (Tracy, 2010). These included coherence between the epistemological stance, methodology, and analytic framework; clarity of reporting analytic decisions with reflexive memos, deeper interpretation than surface description, and the ability to develop analytic claims through distinct data extracts in a consistent way (Yardley, 2000). The purpose of the study was to generate an analysis, which is resonant, rigorous and responsive to the particular social and institutional circumstances of the research environment.

#### ***3.10 Ethical Considerations***

The research study strictly followed the ethical standards of qualitative educational research. All participants signed written informed consent forms after receiving a plain-language description of the purpose and procedures of the study, and their right to pull out at any time, without penalty. Participant codes (P1-P20) were used to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts and audio recordings were stored on password-protected laptops that the research team can access. In none of the data extracts that are included in this paper does any identifiable information show up.

### **4. Findings**

Analysis created three superordinate themes with each having two subordinate themes. Themes represent patterns of shared meaning constructed across the dataset; they do not summarise individual accounts.

#### ***Theme 1: The Weight of Looking Inward***

The overarching theme captured the dominant pattern across participants' narratives: Reflection as they experienced it during their training, was more of an inward-looking process which had a strong emotional dimension. The core organising principle is the burden of self-directed audit, where reflective practice emerged not as a means of professional development but as an occasion for self-evaluation.

### ***1a. Reflection as Self-Audit***

Participants in the dataset reported most commonly being introduced to reflective practice in written forms, mostly reflective journals and post-lesson assessments, tasks implicitly framed reflection as the identification of personal failure. The implicit pedagogy of such tasks was institutionalised reflection as self-audit that involved the identification of personal inadequacy, as opposed to an analysis of the circumstances under which practice is constituted. This dynamic was directly recorded by one of the participants: “Whenever I wrote in a journal, I wrote about what I did wrong. No one ever told me to analyse what made things go wrong, just what I did wrong” (P7). The cumulative impact of this experience was mentioned by another participant: “After three months of such writing, I began to think that I was not a good teacher at all, the reflection was actually making me feel worse, not better” (P14).

Such stories are echoed in the comments of Smith (2011) who notes that in the absence of a theoretical foundation, self-critical reflection risks producing excessive self-scrutiny at the expense of balanced professional analysis (Smith, 2011). The journal activities outlined by the participants put the participants in the centre of accountability regarding all challenges that they face in the course of practicum, rendering the institutional, structural, and relational conditions invisible under which they were subjected to. This invisibility was characterised by one participant in particular in the following way:

*Whenever things went wrong in the classroom, I wondered what I had done in response. Nevertheless, the classroom was full of thirty children with various disabilities, one assistant, who was usually absent, and no resources. I continued to write about myself. However, I did not even think about it until much later that it could also be a reflection of the system. (P3)*

This extract illustrates how the reflective practice modelled in participants' programmes functioned in the personal domain, almost totally leaving out the contextual and critical domains (Smith, 2011). The result was some kind of reflective practice that individualised professional difficulty rather than situating it within institutional and structural conditions.

### ***1b. Emotional Exhaustion and Reflective Withdrawal***

A similar pattern was strongly related to the reaction of the participants to the emotional requirements of receiving self-critical reflection. Multiple participants described a process of progressive disengagement where the affective cost of reflective tasks made them engage in the reflective task more and more perfunctory.

One participant (P11) described writing what the supervisor wanted to read rather than what she actually thought. It was less painful than being depressed weekly. The strategy of another participant was similar: “I learned to write reflection that sounds good. But actual reflection, minding about difficult things, I lost the habit since it was too tiresome” (P19). One of the participants was more straightforward: “At some stage, I was merely moving through the motions, I stopped thinking that the journals were doing anything positive with me” (P5).

This trend is what might be termed reflective withdrawal: a defensive retreat from genuine inquiry, as a reaction to the psychological consequences of self-monitoring. The phenomenon is projected onto issues expressed in the larger literature concerning the counterproductive self-regulatory role of critical reflection when instructed without sufficient theoretical or emotional (affective) support (Boud & Walker, 1998; Smith, 2011). Notably, nothing that was reflected did participants call valueless. Instead, the unique circumstances of its introduction created emotional costs more than the perceived benefits, creating disengagement with a practice they perceived to be of professional significance.

### ***Theme 2: Navigating Institutional and Cultural Constraints***

The second superordinate theme encapsulates how the construction of reflective practice by the participants was influenced by both the institutional and cultural context of the

Punjab special education. The organising concept is participants' active negotiation of institutional and cultural constraints: The acted as active, often tacit agents who cultivated reflective practice within conditions that did not always favour it.

### **2a. Hierarchical Structures and the Silencing of Critical Voice**

In all instances, participants spoke of institutional cultures where critical inquiry into established practices was not institutionally sanctioned. This was evident both in practicum contexts in which the teacher students experienced it or in their own departments where teacher educators promoted it. This cultural situation developed a great gap between the proclaimed value of critical reflection and the real states within which one could practice this reflection.

One participant stated that in our institution one does not challenge the senior teacher: "Reflection implies thinking of yourself, when you begin to reflect on what the system is doing, people think that you are being difficult" (P6). One more participant recounted a certain situation when she tried to ask a question about a practicum practice during a reflective seminar and got a negative response: "After I mentioned that I wanted to know why we never have children make choices, the supervisor told me that I needed to be focused on my teaching instead of policy-making" (P2). The cumulative effect of this climate was described by a third participant as a reason why she was not willing to become a critical participant: "You learn very quickly what sort of reflection is appropriate. You learn to stay in that box" (P13).

Such reports indicate that cultural-institutional processes of the ITE (Special Education) programmes in Punjab selectively sanction self-directed reflection while discouraging contextual and critical reflection, and discourage several others, especially on the context and critical facets of the situation as indicated by Smith (2011): This selective sanctioning of reflection does not reflect individual teacher educator failure but an institutionalisation of these programmes into larger institutional cultures that in turn can be difficult to challenge critically.

### **2b. The Practicum as Contested Reflective Space**

Participant accounts of their practicum placements demonstrated that the school-based part of their training provided both the greatest opportunities for authentic reflection and the greatest institutional constraints on it. The practicum was both the place where it was possible during the practicum that the participants faced the most potentially difficult professional experience and also the place where they felt they could analyse the experience in the least critical way.

Some of the participant noted a trend where serious and disturbing experiences during practicum, witnessing non-inclusive practices, resource deprivation, or misidentification of children with disabilities, led them to reflective questions, which they believed they could not examine within the institutional setting of their training. This is illustrated in the following account from P16:

*My placement was quite unsettling because I observed something that I did not understand. Children were being punished for things related to their disability. I desired to speak of this, to know it, to contemplate it rightfully. But where? We penned our lesson delivery in the journal. There was no space. (P16)*

This description demonstrates how much embedded reflective space, what Schön (1991) terms the circumstances of a reflective practicum is a precondition of critical engagement as opposed to something that can be generated by student teachers themselves. Its lack in the described situation mentioned by P16 meant that potentially transformative experiences went unprocessed, with limited professional benefit. The same lack was expressed by another participant on a different level: "The learning I had the most significant one was during placement, but this has not been structured to make me reflect on it, and I had to carry it on my own" (P9).

### ***Theme 3: Glimpsing Professional Growth Through Relational Reflection***

The third superordinate theme provides a counterpoint to the preceding two themes: It corresponds to the circumstances in which the participants had experience of reflective practice as truly productive, as the way of self-development, but not in regard to self-audit. The main organising principle is the concept of relationality: the observation that productive reflection was always related to relational and not solitary processes.

#### ***3a. Peer Dialogue as Reflective Resource***

Throughout the data set, participants identified informal peer discussion as the primary site of authentic reflection during their training. Such conversations sometimes took place at times when programme activities were not occurring. They created relatively safe situations and within these situations, participants were able to experiment without the critical gaze of supervisors. They were also relieved of self-monitoring associated with written journals. One participant explained: "On the way, I discussed the topic with the rest of the students, and I was able to tell them what I really thought" (P8).

One participant also recounted a certain peer discussion that transformed her perception towards a demanding practicum experience:

*My peer friend questioned me as to why I thought the child was not responding. I told her I just did not know. She said, 'What is it like in that classroom?' That question was a breakthrough for me because I have never thought of looking at it the way she did. (P4)*

This would indicate that the participants found interpersonal reflection in the sense defined by Smith (2011), which involved paying attention to relationships and perspectives the most accessible dimension of reflective practice in peer dialogue settings as opposed to formal supervised reflection (Smith, 2011). Peer conversation because of its dialogic and collaborative nature provided opportunities to engage in perspective-taking and assumption-challenging that amount to deeper reflective involvement (Brookfield, 1987). This difference was explicitly characterised by one of the participants: "In the journal I was alone, with my mistakes. With my peers I was thinking. They are other things" (P18).

#### ***3b. Connecting Personal Experience to Professional Understanding***

A final pattern involved participants drawing on lived personal experience, such as experience of disability in their families or communities, experience of educational disadvantage, or even their personal experience of stigma, to their practice in a way that generated a form of practically grounded professional insight.

One participant explained that one of his younger brothers has a hearing impairment: "It made me realise that this was what school was like to him. When I was teaching, it shifted the way I looked at my students. That, I believe, was reflection, the real reflection, linking what you know to what you see" (P12). Another participant explained that her experiences as a first-generation student in the university helped her think about her students in terms of their families:

*I understand what it is like when the system is not in your favour and you are expected to perform well. That is what makes me introspect about what I am doing, whether like that system or unlike it. Whenever I consider the parents, I work with, I recall that. It causes me to be more cautious about the way I talk to them and what I presume about them. (P17)*

These descriptions indicate what can possibly be interpreted as the experiential bridge-building: using personal experiential knowledge as a tool of professional reflection. Participants in training programmes did not model or scaffold this type of reflection but generated it spontaneously, indicating a potentially highly unexploited capacity of ITE programmes to have participants start with a deep stock of personal knowledge used as a point of departure to invoke deeper reflective experience (Larivee, 2000; Smith, 2011).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The three themes reveal a consistent and concerning pattern of how student teachers in ITE (Special Education) programmes in Punjab are currently leading to the development of reflective practice. The dominant pattern is one in which reflection is framed as self-audit, confined to the personal domain and deliberately excluding the contextual and critical domains through which student teachers can situate their experiences within broader institutional and social frameworks (Smith, 2011). This result broadens the theoretical position of Smith (2011) concerning the risks of under-theorised critical reflection to the realities of a particular empirical situation by showing that the risks Smith (2011) identifies are not merely theoretical but are lived realities that shape professional identity development.

The fact that the relational reflection turned out to be the main location of effective reflective practice is an important result that needs theoretical consideration. This suggests that the individualising nature of written journal tasks that make the process of reflection an individual mental process, may be inherently incompatible with the social and relational processes through which reflective insight is formed. This is in line with Brookfield (1987) emphasis on the collaborative aspects of critical reflection and with a wider presence of the idea that professional learning is irreducibly social (Larivee, 2008).

### 5.2 Connection to Existing Literature

The findings align with other studies on reflective inquiry in teacher education settings in Pakistan that indicate structural and cultural conditions consistently shape the nature of reflection that is possible (Khan et al., 2006; Qureshi, 2001). The need to build up reflective capacity through a long-term, systematic process, which Aslam et al. (2021) found, is further confirmed by the evidence of the present study, according to which the lack of any such form of systematic engagement results in the appearance of self-critical overload or reflective withdrawal (Aslam et al., 2021). This silencing of critical voice in hierarchical cultures extends the existing picture by identifying institutional culture as a barrier distinct from pedagogical design: it implies that it is not a pedagogical design challenge only, but rather it is a challenge of institutional culture change.

The results of the study differ in an important dimension in relation to the prevailing emphasis on teacher education research in Pakistan that, as a rule, concerns the cognitive aspect of the process. The current study foregrounds the affective and relational dimensions of constructing reflective practices, revealing that emotional experience, especially the emotional cost of continuing to be self-critical, is a key mechanism through which student teachers construct their identities as reflective practitioners (Boud & Walker, 1998). This aspect has been minimally considered in the Pakistani ITE studies and is a gap that future studies should fill. The finding also builds on the transformative learning framework as developed by Mezirow (1994) by demonstrating that the disorienting dilemmas he identifies as transformative catalysts are not being systematically used by programmes to facilitate professional development.

### 5.3 Implications

Theoretically, the results can be generalised in relation to four-domain model of critical reflection to show that the personal domain does not operate neutrally in ITE settings but actively colonises other reflective domains: It actually fills other domains when it is a single-domain reflective process that institutional organisations are able to shape to a point of rewarding results (Smith, 2011). This implies that the model should not be comprehended solely as a typology of reflective forms, given that the model is also a political map of which reflective forms are institutionally sanctioned or suppressed. In practice, the results show that ITE (Special Education) programmes in Punjab should restructure their reflective practice

elements to comprise open theoretical basis, guided peer discussion spaces, and structured opportunities for critical analysis of practicum experiences. The experiences with peer dialogue and experience building indicate the existing benefits of early intervention. The positive aspects indicate where the initial efforts can be undertaken to restructure the current system without needing an extensive overhaul of the educational institution. The study methodologically indicates the ability of Reflexive TA to illuminate emotionally and relationally complex patterns of meaning that would be unavailable with more structured methods of analysis.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

The sample used in the study was not representative of all students in Punjab and should not be expected to reflect on the experiences of student teachers in ITE (Special Education) programmes in other provinces in Pakistan where structural and cultural conditions vary. Concentrating on the narratives of student teachers, the viewpoints of teacher educators and supervising teachers themselves, who influence the environment, in which reflection is observed, have not been included into the analysis. Although the current process of transcription with AI assistance was reviewed and corrected by the research team, it could have resulted in minor errors in transcripts, especially where participants used code-switched Urdu-English speech. Such limitations impact the transferability of results, yet the study objective was contextual richness rather than statistical generalisation or formal theory generation (Patton, 2014).

#### **5.6 Future Research Directions**

Future studies could explore individual experiences of teacher educators with teaching critical reflection in ITE (Special Education) programmes, and how their reflection practices influence the pedagogical environment they produce around student teachers. A longitudinal, follow-up study tracing the development of reflective practice from first training to first year's classroom practice would provide valuable data on the subsequent evolution, modification, or break down of the patterns revealed here as the professional experience progresses. Comparison of provincial ITE (Special Education) programmes in Pakistan would determine whether the identified structural and cultural limitations occurring in Punjab are unique to it or reflect systemic trends.

#### **6. Conclusion**

This paper explored ways that student teachers on ITE (Special Education) programmes in Punjab, Pakistan, build reflective practice amid the competing demands of self-criticism and professional development. It identified three themes, which include The Weight of Looking Inward, Navigating Institutional and Cultural Constraints, and Glimpsing Professional Growth Through Relational Reflection. Collectively, these themes indicate reflective practice here is more of a self-audit affair that is limited by hierarchical organisational cultures and that is most effectively realised via an informal form of peer dialogue, and bridge-building, which training programmes do not scaffold to the best of their abilities.

What the study can add to the practice and theory is important. Theoretically, it shows that the taxonomy of reflective domains by Smith (2011) is not merely a typology of forms of available unexpressed but a chart of institutional power that is very different when some domains are allowed and others are repressed in the structural realities of ITE (Special Education) programmes in Punjab. In practical terms, it identifies certain conditions, that is, peer discourse, theoretical foundations of reflection, and critical space of practice in practicum, an ITE programme can work to rebalance self-surveillance and genuine professional development. The capacity of qualitative, situated inquiry to surface these dynamics illustrates its value in ITE research.

Future research would benefit from more in-depth investigation of the teacher educators' views, longitudinal exploration of the reflective practice evolution, and comparison

of conditions given in the provincial and national borders. The student teachers of Punjab who are training as special educators are preparing to work with some of the most marginalised learners in Pakistani education system. It is not an incidental professional issue whether their reflective practice is of a high quality. It is a question of educational justice.

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