

A Study on Teacher Professional Growth and Teaching Improvement Strategies Based on Reflective Practice

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Abstract: In the context of educational reform in the new era, teacher professional growth has shifted from experience accumulation to reflective innovation. As the core link between teaching experience and professional development, reflective practice has become increasingly valuable. Currently, some teachers face challenges such as weak reflective awareness, limited reflective methods, and difficulty in translating reflective findings, leading to a repetitive cycle in teaching improvement. Based on reflective practice theory and the core needs of teacher professional growth, this paper explores the inherent relationship between reflective practice and the improvement of teachers' professional competence through literature review and practical logic analysis. It then proposes a teaching improvement path characterized by "problem-oriented - multidimensional reflection - strategy optimization - practical verification." The research demonstrates that effective reflective practice relies on deep individual reflection, collaborative team reflection, and a regularized reflection mechanism. This approach can help teachers break through the limitations of rigid teaching experience and promote a shift from passive execution to active optimization, ultimately achieving a synergistic improvement in teacher professionalism and teaching quality. The findings of this paper provide theoretical references for primary and secondary school teachers to implement reflective practice and offer practical insights for schools to build support systems for teacher professional development.

Keywords: Reflective practice, teacher professional growth, teaching improvement, teacher development support system, classroom teaching optimization.

1. Introduction

With the goal of building a "high-quality, professional, and innovative teaching force" outlined in "China's Education Modernization 2035," teacher professional growth has become a key issue in the development of high-quality education. Traditional teacher training models often rely on external input methods such as mentoring and apprenticeships and centralized training. While these methods can impart basic teaching skills, they struggle to address the individual challenges teachers face in their actual teaching. For example, some teachers' teaching methods become rigid as their teaching experience increases. Faced with changing student learning needs and innovative teaching technologies, they often lack the ability to self-examine and adjust, resulting in stagnant teaching results. The essence of this "experience trap" lies in teachers' failure to effectively integrate teaching practice with reflective thinking. The concept of reflective practice originates from Dewey's theory of "reflective thinking" and was later developed by scholars such as Schön into core paradigms such as "reflection in action" and "reflection after action." Its core essence is that teachers systematically examine problems, experiences, and outcomes during the teaching process, elevating sensory experience into rational cognition and subsequently adjusting their teaching behavior. Currently, domestic research on reflective practice often focuses on theoretical interpretation or the application of a single reflective method. It lacks a comprehensive understanding of the "reflection-growth-improvement" logical chain and fails to fully consider the diverse reflective needs of teachers across different teaching ages and disciplines.

Based on this, this article focuses on the question of "how to promote teacher professional growth and teaching improvement through reflective practice." Starting with an

analysis of the connotation of reflective practice, this article analyzes the current challenges faced by teachers in reflective practice, constructs a tiered reflective pathway and teaching improvement strategies, and proposes a supporting system. This article aims to provide practical solutions for teachers to overcome professional development bottlenecks and improve teaching quality, while also enriching research on the application of reflective practice in basic education.

2. The Connotation of Reflective Practice and Its Intrinsic Connection to Teacher Professional Growth

Reflective practice is more than a simple summary of teaching. Rather, it involves teachers using their own teaching behaviors as research objects, following a cycle of "discovering problems - analyzing causes - proposing solutions - and verifying effectiveness" to continuously optimize their teaching cognition and behavior. In terms of its connotation, it has three core characteristics: First, it is problem-oriented. Reflection should be grounded in real-world problems encountered in teaching, such as low student engagement and inability to apply knowledge flexibly, rather than abstract theoretical discussions divorced from practice. Second, it is process-oriented. Reflection should be integrated throughout the entire teaching process – considering the rationality of teaching assumptions before class, making adjustments during class based on student responses, and reviewing the results after class, rather than simply summarizing them at the end of the class [1]. Third, it is constructive. Teachers should use reflection to re-evaluate their own teaching philosophies and methods, developing unique teaching wisdom rather than simply blindly copying others' empirical models.

The impact of reflective practice on teachers' professional

growth is primarily reflected in the comprehensive improvement of core competencies. In terms of instructional design, teachers can avoid biases caused by designing based on experience by carefully considering whether the teaching objectives are aligned with the students' level and whether the methods are appropriate for the subject before class. For example, when designing a prose lesson, a Chinese teacher reflected on how their previous sentence-by-sentence analysis had previously lost students' interest. Instead, they switched to a "contextual introduction combined with group exploration," which more effectively achieved the goal of cultivating aesthetic appreciation. In classroom management, "reflection in action" can help teachers adjust their strategies in real time. For example, a math teacher, noticing that students were struggling with function graphs, immediately reflected on whether their explanation was too abstract and then used real-life examples like temperature graphs to quickly improve the lesson. In terms of evaluation and feedback, teachers can reflect after class on whether their evaluation was comprehensive and whether the feedback helped students improve. This can shift evaluation from focusing solely on grades to guiding growth. For example, an English teacher, reflecting on their previous focus on grammatical errors in assignments, later added "highlights of oral expression" and "suggestions for writing ideas," which significantly increased students' motivation to learn [2].

Furthermore, reflective practice can help teachers shift from passively participating in training to actively pursuing professional growth. If reflection can solve practical teaching problems, it will form a positive cycle of "encountering problems - diligently reflecting - making progress." This will lead to proactive learning of new educational theories and teaching techniques, achieving endogenous development through self-improvement. This also demonstrates that reflective practice is not a "supplementary means" for teacher growth, but rather a true core driving force.

3. Analysis of the Current Dilemmas and Causes of Teacher Reflective Practice

Although the importance of reflective practice is widely recognized, in basic education, most teachers' reflection remains "formalistic," "superficial," and "fragmented," failing to truly contribute to professional growth and teaching improvement. This can be seen from three specific aspects.

First, reflection becomes "passive," rooted in a lack of awareness and motivation. Many teachers treat reflection as an "extra task," writing it only to perfunctorily when the school requires it. These reflections often simply review the teaching process without in-depth analysis of the issues. For example, some teachers' reflections simply state, "This lesson flowed smoothly and the students cooperated well," omitting crucial questions like "Are there any students who didn't fully grasp the core knowledge?" or "Which teaching steps were redundant?" On the one hand, teachers are already overwhelmed by the daily workload of preparing lessons, grading assignments, and managing classes, leaving them with little time for deep reflection. On the other hand, schools evaluate reflection solely based on whether the assignments were submitted, not on quality. Without an effective incentive mechanism, teachers naturally lack the motivation to actively reflect.

Secondly, reflection is superficial, stemming from a single

approach and insufficient skills. Most teachers only keep teaching logs, which primarily describe the teaching process, rarely analyzing the causes or considering solutions. For example, one elementary school science teacher's log simply noted, "Three students failed the experiment," without considering whether it was due to insufficient materials or inadequate guidance, nor did they mention how to improve next time. This is primarily due to a lack of systematic training in reflection methods—current teacher training focuses on subject knowledge and teaching techniques, rarely on effective reflection. Even if they want to reflect, they don't know where to begin [3]. Second, some teachers lack critical thinking, constantly using "poor student foundation" and "limited class time" as excuses, unwilling to identify areas for improvement in their own teaching practices.

Finally, reflection is ineffective, driven by a failure to translate and apply the findings. Some teachers are able to deeply reflect and propose solutions, but they fail to validate and adjust their reflections, resulting in their findings being unimplemented. For example, a junior high school history teacher discovered that students had difficulty memorizing historical timelines and considered using a scale chart to aid instruction. However, after just one attempt, she abandoned the idea due to "limited class time" and reverted to her old teaching methods. This stems from a lack of a supportive environment for transformation: the school lacks a platform for reflection and exchange, preventing teachers from receiving peer feedback. Furthermore, teaching evaluations are primarily based on test scores, which doesn't acknowledge the process of reflection and improvement. This lacks the confidence to consistently implement solutions.

4. Building a Reflective Practice Pathway Based on Teacher Professional Growth

To address the challenges faced by teachers in reflective practice, we need to develop a path from the "implementation foundation" and "support" levels, transforming reflection from sporadic behavior into systematic practice and facilitating teacher professional growth.

4.1. Teacher-Student and Collaboration Level: Building a Solid Foundation for the Implementation of Reflective Practice

This level focuses on the "how" of implementation, encompassing both individual teacher reflection and team collaboration, and is the core of reflective implementation. Individual reflection should be integrated into the entire teaching process. Before class, consider whether the assumptions are reasonable. For example, when preparing a lesson on "Applications of Percentages," an elementary school math teacher might anticipate that students might not understand its relevance to everyday life, so they prepare examples about shopping mall discounts and utility bills. During class, adjustments should be made sensitively. For example, when a Chinese teacher notices students distracted during a poetry lesson, they immediately reflect on whether their teaching is too abstract and switch to playing audio recitations and connecting them to real-life scenarios. After class, a thorough review should be conducted. For example, an English teacher might note that "there was insufficient participation in the oral dialogue" and analyze that "the topic was not relevant to the students," so they might plan to switch

to topics related to campus activities or family life next time. This comprehensive reflection process can help teachers form a closed loop of "teaching - reflection - adjustment," improving their instructional design and classroom management skills.

Teamwork can overcome the limitations of individual experience. The teaching and research group can establish a "themed reflection" mechanism: First, identify a topic based on a common problem encountered by teachers, such as "How to optimize classroom questioning." Then, have one or two teachers share case studies, such as "My previous questions were too simple, but after trying structured questioning, students became more engaged." Everyone then discusses applicable scenarios and solutions, ultimately developing a scalable solution. Cross-disciplinary learning can also be leveraged [4]. For example, if a math teacher says, "Practice logic by analyzing wrong questions," Chinese teachers can learn to have students identify logical loopholes in composition classes. This allows reflection lessons to be applied across disciplines and fosters a sense of collaboration among teachers.

4.2. School Support: Building a Support System for Sustainable Reflection

Schools are key to the long-term advancement of reflection, and a comprehensive support mechanism must be established. First, resources and incentives are needed, such as establishing a "Special Reflection Fund" to help teachers purchase relevant books and organize research exhibitions. When incorporating reflection into assessments, the focus should be not only on the quality of the reports, but also on the effectiveness of teaching improvements, such as improvements in student grades and class participation. This creates a "reflection-improvement-recognition" cycle to motivate teachers. Secondly, platforms for communication and guidance should be established: regular sharing sessions should be held to invite outstanding teachers to share their experiences, and online communities should be established to facilitate the sharing of cases and the asking of questions. University experts or veteran teachers can also be invited to serve as "reflection mentors." For example, teachers lacking deep reflection skills could be taught through SWOT analysis, identifying teaching problems from multiple perspectives and helping them improve their reflection skills.

5. Specific Strategies for Reflective Practice to Drive Teaching Improvement

The ultimate goal of reflective practice is to drive teaching improvement. The key is to translate the findings of reflection into concrete teaching adjustments, focusing on three core areas: instructional design, classroom implementation, and evaluation and feedback.

In instructional design, reflection should focus on the alignment of objectives and methods. Teachers can review whether previous teaching objectives have been achieved. For example, a junior high physics teacher might find that they haven't adequately taught "understanding the principle of buoyancy." They might determine that the objective was too general and break it down into three layers: "definition, explanation of phenomena, and design of small experiments" to adapt to different students. If a teaching method isn't working, such as when students struggle to understand

abstract concepts, they can switch to situational learning with model demonstrations. If, when teaching writing, they find that students struggle with detailed descriptions, they can include more fragment exercises and sentence-by-sentence comments, moving away from relying solely on empirical design [5].

In classroom implementation, reflection should focus on the effectiveness of interaction and control. Regarding interaction, consider whether previous questions were too simple. For example, in math class, instead of asking, "Is the answer 3?", ask, "How did you calculate the answer? Tell me your thinking process." Also, ask questions of varying difficulty based on student level to ensure everyone can participate. Regarding control, if criticizing distracted students wasn't effective, switch to eye contact and encourage interest with "Let's have a little challenge to see who's faster." Also, consider time allocation. If a particular section is taking too long, remove redundant content to maintain the pace of the instructional objectives.

In evaluation and feedback, reflection should move from grading to helping students grow. First, examine whether previous evaluations focused solely on scores. For example, in addition to written tests, consider adding classroom presentations, creative writing, and group contributions. Involve students in self-evaluation, peer review, and parent participation, rather than relying solely on teacher evaluation. Furthermore, optimize feedback methods, moving beyond simply saying "well done" or "work harder." For example, when marking math homework, instead of just highlighting errors, write "You haven't mastered the derivation of triangle area; see page XX in the textbook." In class, also say, "Your thinking is clear; adding a real-life example will make it more complete." This ensures that evaluations truly help students improve and teachers understand their needs [6].

6. Build a Support System for The Sustained Advancement of Reflective Practice

To ensure the long-term advancement of reflective practice, we cannot rely on temporary enthusiasm. We must establish a three-pronged support system: "systems, resources, and training" to provide teachers with stable support and prevent reflection from being a fleeting phenomenon.

Institutionally, the key is to make reflection a "normal" practice. Schools need to address this issue through three key areas: assessment, motivation, and management. Assessments shouldn't simply focus on the number of reflection reports submitted or their length; they should also examine actual results—for example, whether student satisfaction has increased, grades have improved, and classroom performance has improved. This can be done by reviewing teachers' teaching logs regularly and their teaching improvement cases at the end of the semester. Incentives should also be implemented, with programs like "Excellent Reflection Teacher" and "Good Case Award" offering bonuses, training opportunities, and even extra points in professional evaluations, ensuring that teachers feel reflection is both useful and rewarding. Regarding management, a "Reflection Guidance Group" should be formed with school leaders, teaching and research group leaders, and senior teachers to help teachers resolve issues. A semester plan should also be established, clearly defining themes and timelines for reflection, to avoid leaving teachers with unnecessary work.

In terms of resources, the key is to "find helpers" for teachers. First, create a "reflection resource library" within the school, categorizing excellent examples and methods by subject and length of teaching experience. Have veteran teachers record videos explaining how to reflect deeply and apply reflection to teaching, helping new teachers get started. Externally, connect with universities and research institutions, invite experts to give lectures, introduce reflection-related books and online courses, and organize teachers to observe "reflection classes" at other schools to learn from their best practices. An online platform should also be established, with a reflection column on the school's official website or WeChat official account, along with a discussion group where teachers can readily share their concerns and experiences without having to worry about finding someone to ask [7].

Training should target teachers' weaknesses. New teachers or those with weak reflection skills should first be taught basic methods—for example, how to keep a teaching journal and analyze lesson examples. Teachers should practice with their own lessons, with mentors providing guidance. For those with a solid foundation, the focus should be on critical thinking and how to implement reflection findings. This could include workshops to collaboratively explore how to integrate reflection into school-based curriculum. Individualized guidance is also necessary. For example, if a teacher isn't sure what to reflect on, we can help them choose a theme. If they can't translate their findings, we can help them create a plan. Furthermore, we can establish mentoring partnerships, where teachers with strong reflection skills mentor newer teachers, regularly observing and evaluating their reflections to gradually improve.

7. Conclusion

Reflective practice, as a core method for helping teachers grow and improve their teaching, not only addresses specific teaching issues but also cultivates a habit of self-examination and the ability to continuously improve, enabling teachers to move from "teaching by experience" to "learning to research and teach."

Previous research has found that current teachers often face challenges with reflection: a lack of awareness, limited methods, and inability to apply their findings. This needs to be addressed at the individual, team, and school levels. By building a reflective approach and optimizing instructional design, classroom implementation, and evaluation and feedback, we can transform the results of this reflection into practical teaching improvements. Furthermore, we rely on a comprehensive support system of "systems, resources, and training" to ensure the continued advancement of this reflection process.

From the perspective of teacher development, reflection can help teachers break the cycle of "experience fixation." Through the cycle of "reflection - adjustment - teaching," they can gradually improve core competencies such as instructional design, classroom management, and evaluation and feedback, developing their own unique teaching techniques and achieving endogenous growth through "self-

improvement." From the perspective of teaching improvement, reflection can transform teaching from "passively following a process" to "active optimization." Through systematic reflection on the entire teaching process, practical teaching problems can be resolved and classroom quality improved, ultimately forming a virtuous cycle of "reflection promoting teaching, and teaching promoting growth." However, this study still has shortcomings. For example, it lacks in-depth analysis of the differences in reflection between liberal arts and science teachers, and between new and experienced teachers. Future research could further refine the research subjects and develop more targeted approaches. Furthermore, there is a lack of clear indicators for scientifically evaluating the effectiveness of reflection. Future work could combine data on student performance and classroom engagement, along with teacher reflection reports and student interviews, to develop a multi-dimensional evaluation model.

In practice, it is recommended that schools take reflection seriously, incorporating it into core teacher professional development plans, improving support systems, fostering a reflective atmosphere, and making reflection a daily habit for teachers. Teachers themselves should also actively engage in reflection, learn reflective methods, participate more frequently in team-based reflection, and apply the insights gained from reflection in their teaching. Only in this way can reflective practice truly achieve its full potential, both helping teachers grow and improving teaching quality, and laying a solid foundation for teacher development in the new era of education reform.

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