

Reflective Practices of Secondary School Teachers: A Systematic Review of the Theoretical and Empirical Landscape

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Abstract

Reflective practice seems to pop up a lot in today's conversations about teacher professionalism, you know, in that kind of way where people say it matters but also kind of mean different things. For secondary school teachers, it becomes a method to turn the everyday classroom moments into something more like professional learning, not just events that happened. Even if there's more and more research on this topic, the work that really zooms in on secondary school settings is still rather thin. And to complicate it, existing reviews don't quite line up: they vary in the models they choose, the methods they use, and the kinds of outcomes they talk about. This paper, then, offers a theoretical review of literature about reflective practice among secondary school teachers. It draws on important theories of reflection from people like Dewey, Schön, Kolb, and Brookfield. It also points to studies released between 2015 and 2026, though obviously that span brings in a range of perspectives. The whole review is loosely arranged around four ideas: first, the conceptual models that steer reflection; second, how reflective practice connects with teacher effectiveness and identity; third, the situations and conditions that make reflection possible; and fourth, the barriers that still show up, even when people want change. Overall the findings suggest reflective practice is, consistently, tied to stronger teaching and more professional resilience. Still, it's not an automatic win, because the benefits tend to rely on structured guidance, actual time set aside by schools, and some real support from colleagues. The paper finishes with implications for teacher education, school leadership, and future research, basically positioning this work as a small step toward a clearer, more coherent theoretical grasp of reflective practice specifically at the secondary level.

Keywords: professional development, reflective practice, , Schön ,secondary school teachers, , systematic review , teacher efficacy.

1. Introduction

The assumption that teacher reflection, much like a well-designed training course, offers as much professional benefit to teachers as an external program has a history in educational thinking; a history which impacts the way professional development is both conceptualized and evaluated today. The practice of reflection-in-action (or reflection on action) which entails thinking critically about one's practice in order to shape and inform one's behavior, has transitioned from a peripheral academic interest to being an essential requirement in standards, induction procedures and appraisal systems in many education systems across the world. For the secondary school teacher who has to manage a knowledge base across a specific subject, face examination targets, work with adolescents at varying stages of development and cater to

increasingly diverse classrooms, reflective practice can sometimes be regarded as evidence of professional development.

Much of the existing literature, however, is fragmented, adopting a range of theoretical models and approaches to teaching and learning: a range which includes the thought-related processes advocated by Dewey; the notion of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as developed by Schön; the use of the experiential learning cycle in the model advocated by Kolb and the reflective practice cycle championed by Gibbs, as well as the critical lenses developed by Brookfield. The literature also includes varied research methods from qualitative interviews and questionnaires to action research and document analysis and studies span teacher level – from pre-service to primary and secondary level teaching right up to the higher education arena and across different professional contexts. A synthesis specifically of the latter is important because secondary school teachers face particular dilemmas over and above those encountered by other practitioners of educational processes. High-stakes assessments, curriculum pressures in subject specialisms and the ever-developing complexities of teenage interactions and demands within the secondary school classroom significantly affect how teachers reflect and also where these challenges lie. This paper therefore is a theoretical review of reflective practice within secondary school teaching. The purpose is to achieve clarity of conceptual understanding to guide empirical research, and to assist in developing effective teacher education and professional development.

2. Rationale and Objectives of the Review

There were three main reasons why it was deemed necessary to embark upon a review of secondary school teachers' reflective practice:. Firstly, reflection is appearing as a key dimension within teacher competencies in national documents but theory base is limited regarding the reasons for this expectation. Secondly, there has been a marked growth in the last decade or so of empirical studies of the reflective practice of secondary school teachers.

Such studies are distributed widely across countries and traditions of education, however, and do not cumulatively provide a sufficient picture of the field.

Thirdly, whilst recent systematic and PRISMA-compliant reviews of aspects of reflective teaching exist, a review that focuses on the reflective practice of secondary teachers which takes both theoretical considerations and the nature of schooling seriously does not.

The review set out to:

1. explore major theories of reflective practice among secondary school teachers;
2. synthesize empirical evidence of the connection of reflective practice to teacher efficacy, the professional self, and professional development and renewal.
3. review main conditions for sustaining engagement with practice, and
4. review common constraints on engaging productively with practice on an enduring basis.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretic basis of reflection can be traced back to **John Dewey's (1933)** definition of thinking reflection as the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds for holding it and the conclusions to which it supports, where an action move from doubt to the assurance of well-grounded knowledge through investigation. Dewey defined that reflection thinking differ from habit-thinking and he described three components of reflective thinking: open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and responsibility-taking.

Schön (1983) built on Dewey's conception by presenting two kinds of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurs while teachers are practicing and it allows teacher to adjust their practice as a particular situation occurs, while reflection-on-action allows a teacher to consider how one performed a lesson once it is completed. In teaching in the secondary schools, modifying explanations when the students do not seem to understand can be seen as example for reflection-in-action, and reviewing lesson after one complete is reflection-on-action.

A supplementary model was offered by **Kolb (1984)** who described an experiential learning cycle in which learning was conceptualized in terms of four stages which represent learning as continuous: experience of particular events, reflection upon these events, conceptualization of these events, and active testing of these concepts. Kolb's cycle is especially influential in initial teacher training courses where it offers an 'all singing, all dancing', iterative approach to reflection within an ongoing learning experience as opposed to a purely retrospective one. It is also similar to a cyclical learning model devised by **Gibbs (1988)**, a six-stage approach: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan, has been used a great deal in professional education where it structures reflective practice.

Brookfield (1995, 2017) developed this concept further with his notion of the critical element of reflection. The four-lens approach of Brookfield asks teachers to consider their practice from their own as a learner/teacher, the students' point of view, the views of the student's peers and theorists in the literature. This approach extends the description of reflection from technical descriptions of practice toward critical questioning of assumptions, authority and taken for granted beliefs about teachers and learning.

These theories provide a conceptual framework which helps make sense of reflection in the empirical literature and provides the dimensions of reflection-before and after teaching and during teaching, learning cycle, and critical reflection.

4. Methodology

The theoretical narrative review followed principles of the systematic review particularly for the transparent search and selection of literature and was an appropriate choice for reviewing theoretical models or themes across a range of qualitative, quantitative and conceptual works when differing research designs or outcome measures prevented statistical pooling of results for meta-analysis. Literatures were searched in education specific databases/repositories (ERIC, Scopus, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Taylor & Francis journal platforms) through use of search term(s) 'reflective practice' or 'reflective teaching' in combination with 'secondary school teachers,' 'teacher efficacy' 'professional development' or 'systematic review.' These searches focused on English language works published roughly between 2015 - 2026, augmented by prior canonical texts on this subject, if still predominantly cited as key conceptual work for the field (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988; Brookfield, 1995).

A source was only included if it discussed reflective practice or reflective teaching among secondary school or high school teacher-educators, or offered theoretical or systematic insights into teaching reflectivity where clearly applicable within the secondary school curriculum. A limited number of sources based on higher or primary education may be referred to, but only if they make a particularly strong contribution to the theoretical literature or if its content has broad applicability beyond the scope of this paper; it was therefore unnecessary to limit criteria by educational levels alone. This provided the framework within which to review and summarize the resulting literature thematically for the four aims of this paper.

By adopting this approach rather than a study-by-study review, it allows a more integrated summary of significant theories and recurrent themes evident in the literature.

Like all such narrative syntheses the selection and interpretative process required a degree of subjectivity, thus this is viewed as a strategic map of the field of inquiry rather than as an definitive (and statistically weighted) overview of each study in existence.

5. Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

5.1 Models and Frameworks Applied to Secondary Teachers' Reflection

There appears to be a rich literature of models that are structure-based and staged for reflective practice in secondary school teachers. For instance, a qualitative study on secondary school teachers in Punjab conducted interviews based around Gibbs' six stage cycles of reflection and analyzing teachers' accounts of reflection: the article concluded that the tool aided teachers (who were unfamiliar with structured forms of reflection) how to frame their thoughts regarding what had happened in the classroom and how could do differently (Journal of Asian Development Studies, 2024). Likewise, findings from different literature report that teachers whom reflect 'casually' benefit from a way in which to collect their thoughts concerning reflection on practice- Teachers who do use informal reflections of their practice in such cases might require a way in which to capture their reflections of their teaching. In this context it is not the reflective cycle per se, which is significant.

Others have explored teachers' responses to situations during teaching, and reflection on their practice after teaching using Schön's differentiation between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. This framework has been used to explore the reflective practice of secondary and higher education teachers. One 2025 conceptual paper examining reflective practice and teachers' professional commitment integrates Dewey, Schön, and Kolb with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Deci and Ryan's theory of self-determination to argue that reflective practice enhances the professional commitment of teachers by promoting self-awareness, and boosting motivational states (International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 2025). The integrative, multi-theory use as outlined above is a popular approach found in recent literature and reflects a wider trend for an understanding of reflective practice through more than one theory, rather than through one reflection model.

5.2 Reflective Practice, Teacher Efficacy, and Professional Identity

Another key aspect of the literature is the relation between reflective practice and teacher self-efficacy. A systematic review published on Educational Administration: Theory and Practice (2024) confirms that through regular reflections teachers are capable to identify their strengths and weaknesses, enhance their teaching effectiveness and gain competence and confidence in their roles. The review also claims that reflections can foster positive and resilience professional disposition toward teaching and help teachers cope with uncertainties in the classroom.

A connected qualitative study focused on teacher identity revealed that in-service teachers (secondary education) considered reflective practice a key aspect of their professional identity and continued development rather than just academic work. On the other hand, pre-service teachers were inclined to consider reflection a requirement of their teacher training curriculum (International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation, 2025). The difference in how reflection is perceived by beginning versus experienced teachers emerges on several other studies, thus highlighting the need to foster and guide reflection with regard to teachers' careers.

A 2026 PRISMA systematic literature review (2015-2025) again draws on the literature to state that teaching reflection promotes better instructional practices, professional identity, critical thinking and emotional resilience, in addition to the increasing importance of collaborative teaching reflections in the form of professional learning communities and mediated on technologies (ResearchGate, 2026). Together, these studies define the image of reflective practice as more of a continuous process that shapes teachers' professional identity as secondary school teachers rather than an isolated technique.

5.3 Enabling Conditions for Reflective Practice

However the literature also suggests some factors that will promote teachers working reflectively. One reason why using some structured ways of reflecting such as those of Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988) can help teachers is because they take them further than describing lessons and can lead them to analytically appraise lessons. This kind of work seems most valuable in a collaborative environment when teachers talk to each other, sharing experiences and the problem solving necessary when planning and developing practice.

There is also evidence that leadership support for teachers using reflective practice contributes to effective use of it.

For example, qualitative study (MDPI, Education Sciences, 2026) of school leaders in United States, that leader that incorporated reflection into routine tasks such as peer group meetings and end-of- year performance reviews (not only checking of reflections required by authorities). Another quantitative study (Reflective Practice, 2024), focused on 361 secondary school teacher, confirmed that the frequency of participation in reflective work and how extensively this work was valued, promoted by school leadership and adequate amount of time and resources provided to work. The evidence clearly indicates that reflective practice is not only personal skill or inclination but rather its implementation depends significantly upon a level of support in a particular learning environment.

5.4 Barriers to Reflective Practice

The lack of time is consistently stated throughout the research conducted. Teachers working in high and further education institutions state the pressure of workloads such as planning, marking, administration and additional duties reduce any opportunity for uninterrupted thought necessary to reflect (International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation, 2025: Reflective Practice journal, 2022). It was said by teaching staff in a Scottish university that lack of time was considered as not only an obstruction to reflection but a barrier to professional duties overall with these sentiments reiterating other research into time pressures encountered by faculty (Reflective Practice journal, 2022).

Within the research conducted, other barriers include the emotional and psychological factors of what might be uncovered during reflection and exposure to the comments of peers (MDPI, Education Sciences, 2026). Logistical constraints are also mentioned such as large class numbers and routine, prescribed assignments such as teaching journals (MDPI, Education Sciences, 2026). For newly qualified and pre-service teachers it can be found that this lack of mentor support and guidance hinders them from moving to deeper reflective stages (Journal of Research in Professional Education, 2025). Institution also plays a role; the researcher stated that reflection has been perceived as a required formality and not a part of an ongoing professional pursuit, meaning the work had been a checklist, not reflective work (MDPI, Education Sciences, 2026).

6. Discussion

Taken together, the literature presented herein leads to three general conclusions: (1) Overall convergence

exist conceptually and empirically on reflective practice's potential benefits to secondary teachers' instruction, self-efficacy, and professional identity no matter what particular reflection models (Schön's, Kolb's, Gibbs', or Brookfield's) are utilized. (2) Reflective practice does not automatically foster professional and instructional improvements. Instead these gains are heavily dependent on school infrastructure and culture, such as protected time, support from administrators, and the opportunity to practice and discuss reflection with colleagues.

(3) In the reflective practice literature, there is tension between teacher autonomy over reflection as a transformative authentic process and the mandate of reflection as an externally driven compliance mechanism, like within appraisal and accreditation systems.

According to several recent reviews, when this compliance becomes too rigid, reflection becomes superficial and can lose the critical and transformative component that scholars like Brookfield and Schön advocate for in this pedagogical practice. One final area that is worthy of note is the increasing popularity of collaborative and technology-mediated forms of reflection (digital journals, online PLCs) that are being cited by recent reviews as a growing trend. This can suggest that while conceptual underpinnings of reflective practice may not be shifting substantially, practical implementation of it by secondary teachers is changing with time and in response to advances in technology and program delivery in schools.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

There is some evidence to support many practical applications from this synthesis. For example, for teacher educators, the research indicated an increased case for the use of analytic and reflective frameworks along with mentoring within initial and pre-service teacher programs so that new and early-career teachers may engage beyond descriptive reflection to that associated with richer outcomes. School leaders' attention to creating time in professional learning time to reflect on practice rather than focus on evaluation of that practice would be indicated, along with modeling reflective dialogue with teachers. It would further seem that if policymakers were to consider a need for professional development involving reflection, they ought to move beyond simply mandating reflection and take into consideration what conditions are necessary for such work to develop into deep or transformative reflective practice that may support greater benefit for teaching practice.

8. Limitations of the Review

There are also several limitations to this review in relation to methodology shared with narrative and theoretically derived syntheses. First, searches were limited to the English-language literature and a subset of databases/Platforms: any research that has been published in a different language, or has been published in a narrower reach journal without indexation within these, will not have been captured by this review. Second, given the range of methodologies and variable amounts of detail provided across the selected articles some sources will inevitably be provided as an overall description rather than a detailed and specific attribution and those individuals using this paper in order to submit a publishable report should check all bibliographic details of any source cited as per original papers. Third, given the review format is not a quantitative meta-analysis it will not provide an indication of the efficacy and consistency of interventions and other identified phenomena

9. Conclusion

In this paper the theoretical and empirical literature on secondary teachers' reflective practice has been

brought together to create an overview of the field organized into theory, models of reflection used in empirical studies, a link between reflection and self-efficacy and teacher identity, and the conditions of reflective practice, both enabling factors and barriers, which are necessary for reflection to lead to meaningful professional learning. In conclusion, research to date strongly indicates that when structured and supported in particular ways, reflective practice leads to enhanced secondary teachers' teaching expertise, robustness and professional identity; the literature nevertheless reinforces that reflection does not just 'happen' because it is a mandated activity; more work needs to be done on the role that allocated time, mentorship and school context play in ensuring that reflection can live up to its theorized potential. Finally, suggestions for future research include further subject-specific and longitudinal investigations of teachers' reflective practice in secondary schools, and an exploration of the impact that the use of digital and collaborative technologies have on it.

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