
Professional Development of Early Childhood Teachers Through Reflective Practices

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Abstract

Reflective practices in early childhood education (ECE) are critical for enhancing children's learning outcomes and supporting teachers' professional development. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine the relationship between teachers' reflective practices and their professional development in ECE settings. The quantitative phase involved 196 private-sector ECE teachers who completed an adapted survey questionnaire. The subsequent qualitative phase explored teachers' lived experiences through semi-structured interviews with six early childhood teachers to further explain the quantitative findings. Quantitative results indicated a significant positive relationship between teachers' reflective practices and their professional development. Specifically, self-assessment, documentation, and parental interaction were identified as key reflective practices that promote professional growth among ECE teachers. Qualitative findings supported these results, revealing that the consistent use of reflective practices enhances teachers' professional competencies and reflective awareness. The study recommends the systematic integration of reflective practices in early childhood education, as they contribute to improved teaching quality and sustained professional development.

Keywords: Early Childhood Teachers, Professional Development, Reflective Practices In Ece, Parental Interaction, Documentation Of Learning, Self-Assessment, Lived Experiences, Critical Reflectivity, Evidence-Based Practice, Collaborative Partnership

Introduction

Teachers at the early childhood level are expected to be professionally sound (Kahila et al., 2024). A professional requirement for teachers is to engage in reflective practice in class, providing students with ample opportunities to express their learning in their own ways (Schachter, 2015). Reflective practices provide teachers with an opportunity to self-evaluate their own learning. Early childhood teachers require reflective practices: 1) parental interaction; 2) documentation of learning, and 3) self-assessment (Isik-Ercan & Perkins, 2017). The framework includes interaction with practitioners, families, and programs, as well as practice based on documentation and action-planning steps. However, to keep the study's scope aligned, only three stages have been operationalized.

This study examines the reflective practices of early childhood teachers working in the private sector in Islamabad, with the aim of promoting opportunities for professional development. These practices align with

students' learning and with teachers' pedagogical development and professional development (Fonsén et al., 2023). These reflective practices provide a clear, in-depth understanding of learning opportunities for learners, especially teachers, thereby enhancing professional attitudes (Rashid & Aurangzeb, 2025).

Interaction with parents provides the opportunity to reflect on teachers' pedagogies and children's performance. Parental feedback is an effective tool for better understanding children, keeping the parental perspective in mind (Noreen et al., 2025). McKenna, Olsen, and Pasalich (2022) describe how the breadth of a parental lens for understanding children's strengths and learning patterns enriches pedagogical practices. The teacher can reflect on the chosen teaching strategies in light of parental feedback and amend pedagogical practices (Ma, Liu & Li, 2022).

Documentation of children's learning records enables teachers to maintain a systematic check on children's performance, which, in turn, reflects improved teaching styles (Carlsen & Clark, 2022). Children's performance demonstrates the teacher's continued effort to maintain prior performance levels. Documenting children's learning provides early childhood educators with an opportunity for professional development (Decker et al., 2023). Knowing individual areas of improvement based on children's performance, recorded manually or digitally, engages teachers in one of the best professional development dimensions: personal growth, by unlearning old practices and adopting new ones aligned with children's performance, while maintaining a bidirectional growth perspective (Alaçam, 2025).

Early childhood education is a challenging time for children, and teachers working with them at this age need to be well prepared to enhance the learning experience (Leggett, 2025). Children and teachers have several opportunities to reflect, beginning with a written reflection that allows them to share experiences that have influenced their perspectives on the world. Undoubtedly, implementing reflective practices can be challenging, particularly when keeping contextual requirements in mind; yet, this practice benefits teachers' professional development, enriching their experiences (Leggett, 2025).

Literature Review

The developments for teachers are deliberately designed to facilitate reflection. Documentation of learning and self-evaluation provides ample opportunities to reflect and sustain the development process (Sellars, 2012). Teachers' reflective lens sharpens with a critical approach. The developmental cycle aligns directly with critical thinking and with unlearning ineffective methods and replacing them with reflective practices in early childhood education (Xiaoya, 2022). Opportunities for self-reflection, action planning, and documenting the experience shape this teacher's approach to reflection, enabling a rich learning experience for children at the ECE level (Cigala et al., 2019).

Incorporating reflective practices is recommended for early childhood education teachers as a framework for understanding and guiding their actions (Recchia & Beck, 2014). This approach can enhance their professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions across various contexts. Reflective practice should be integrated into all professional learning environments, including higher education, teacher preparation programs, and other settings where early childhood practitioners engage in quality improvement efforts (Paige-Smith & Craft, 2011).

Maxine Greene, a student of John Dewey, contended that teachers primarily serve as models and vectors of intellectual engagement and action within schools. Dewey was among the early educational theorists to emphasize the importance of reflection in teachers' professional lives. His criteria for reflection encompassed a philosophical perspective that highlights the importance of teachers' intellectual development, the presence of a community of reflective practitioners, and an inquiry approach similar to scientific investigation (Rodgers, 2002).

Reflection encourages educators to examine and scrutinize their own beliefs and practices through ongoing dialogue within sustained collaborative efforts (Bullough & Baughman, 1997). Reflective practices may help bridge the divide between critical perspectives and teachers' roles, for example, by positioning teachers as

transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1998).

Mezirow's concept of critical reflection (1990) summarizes a developmental spectrum. It begins with reflecting on the practical aspects of teaching and learning, moves to questioning information and practices, to understanding opinions, and ultimately involves transforming beliefs. Schön (1983, 1987) introduced the concept of reflection-in-action, which enables teachers to make decisions throughout daily practice and implement plans for immediate action. This enhances teachers' professional expertise and enables them to make better choices in daily academic practices.

Reflective practices help practitioners and leaders redefine quality in teaching and learning beyond external standards (Appleby & Andrews, 2012). External standards vary with context, time, and space. Keeping the indigenous context real and valuing children's shared responses enhances teachers' capacity for critical thinking with children and for personal and professional development. Reflection approaches should vary according to children's developmental stage. The framework for reflective practices in early childhood education enhances teachers' professional development through reflection (Machost & Stains, 2023).

Pedagogical refinement and personal growth can be supported by adding value to ECE practices by documenting daily records and interpreting areas for improvement before applying the documented facts (Chen, 2023). Teachers can critically assess their judgments by applying a developmental approach, which involves self-analysis of their daily actions during interactions with children. Self-analysis does not come with the pressure of monitoring and provides an opportunity to reflect on oneself (Damiani, Unick & Schultz, 2024). Knowing children well increases a teacher's ability to connect with them in different, more productive ways. The documented reflection doubles the impact when aligned with parental interaction, and after action, the teacher analyzes personal performance based on the documented facts, showing how much improvement can be noticed in early childhood children (Spicer-Escalante & Read, 2022).

Research Objectives

The objectives of the research were to:

1. Identify whether there is any relationship between early childhood teachers' professional development and the use of reflective practices.
2. Explore the enhancement of professional development of early childhood teachers through reflective practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions were designed in alignment with the research objectives:

1. What is the relationship between reflective practices and professional development among early childhood teachers?
2. How do professional development be enhanced through reflective practices of early childhood teachers?

Conceptual Framework

The framework proposed by Isik-Ercan & Perkins (2017) is adapted for this study. The framework provides multiple opportunities for professional development for teachers at all levels in academic settings. This study specifically involves three reflective practices, as outlined in the framework by Isik-Ercan & Perkins (2017). The adapted framework for this study exhibits the following interlinked patterns between teacher reflective practices and their professional development.

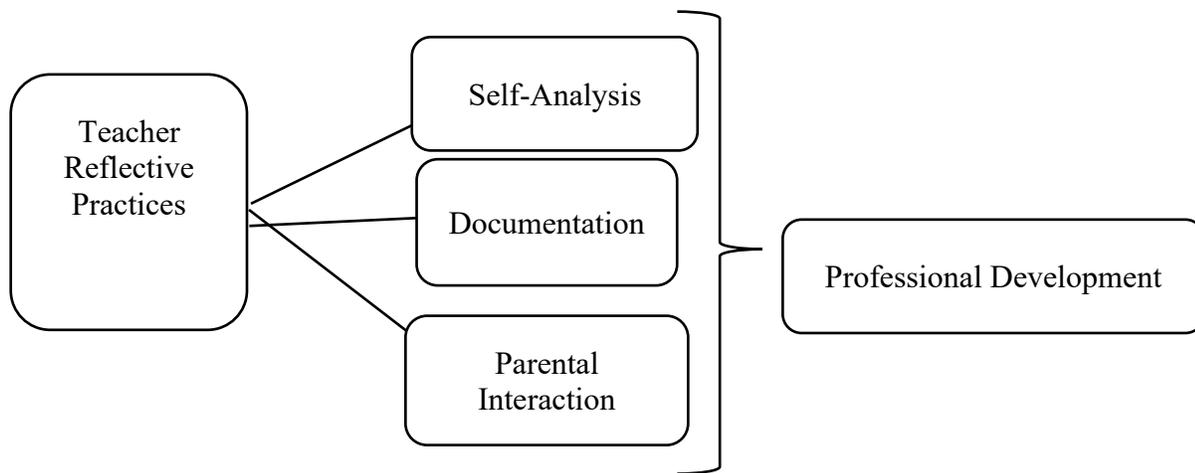


Fig 1: Framework: Reflection for Meaning and Action

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods, explanatory sequential design to examine the relationship between early childhood teachers' professional development and their reflective practices. In the first stage, data were collected through a survey administered to teachers in Private schools in Islamabad, who comprised the study population. The two-stage cluster random sampling method was used. The first stage consisted of selecting 30 schools. In the first stage, 30 ECE schools with 360 teachers participated, whereas in the second stage, 196 ECE teachers participated in a shared survey for data collection. The survey questionnaire was adapted according to the contextual requirements.

To explore the lived experiences of 6 early childhood teachers participating in the study, their experiences were recorded. The selection of the teachers was based on the following criteria:

- Teachers with a minimum of 3-5 years of experience working in an early childhood academic setting.
- Teachers who willingly provided consent to be part of the study.

The survey questionnaire consisted of two sections: 1) Teacher Reflective Practices (TPR) in ECE, including three reflective domains: i) Parental Interaction (PI), ii) Documentation of learning (DL), and iii) Self-analysis (SA), and Professional development (PD) through reflective practices. Teachers' responses to reflective practices determine the opportunities for professional development in ECE. The instrument had a statistically acceptable value $\alpha = 0.867$.

After collecting quantitative data, voluntary participants were contacted for semi-structured interviews. To gather and interpret participants' lived experiences, six participants were selected in accordance with the suggested sample for interpreting phenomenological voices. The questions were designed and evaluated by the supervisor before the interviews were conducted.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather lived experiences and understand which areas of professional development can be achieved by aligning with reflective practices in early childhood teaching. Interviews were conducted on school premises with the administration's permission. Participants were assured that their identity would not be disclosed and pseudonyms would be used if required.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means) and inferential statistics, along with an inter-item correlation matrix, to examine the relationship between professional development and teachers' reflective

practices.

To illustrate themes from the transcription for qualitative analysis, the following steps were considered: The interpretive themes, rooted in the participants' lived experiences, were coded using the phenomenological analysis framework by Smith and Fieldsend (2021). The analysis involved three main steps: defining the themes, integrating them, and elaborating on their meanings.

- Reviewed teacher transcriptions multiple times to develop an in-depth understanding of professional growth through reflective practices in early childhood education.
- Repeated and out-of-context views were separated.
- Central themes were identified, and codes from six interviews were sorted. A thematic index was created after identifying synergy in ECE teachers' lived experiences.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	M	SD
Professional Development	4.08	2.77
Self-Assessment	4.84	2.18
Documentation of Learning	4.03	1.88
Parental Interaction	4.86	3.00

PD= Professional development; SA=Self-Assessment; DL=Documentation of Learning and PI=Parental Interaction

The statistical results indicate that early childhood teachers continue to develop professionally (*PD*; *Mean* = 4.08) through reflective practices in academic settings. Teachers' self-assessment (*SA*; *Mean*=4.84), documentation of students' learning (*DL*; *M*=4.03), and parental interactions (*PI*; *M*=4.86) are among the most effective reflective practices that enable ECE teachers to identify their professional strengths and reflect on their professional development.

Table 2

Correlation matrix between teacher reflective practices and professional development

Variables	SA	DL	PI	TRP	PD
Self-Assessment	1				
Documentation of Learning	.974**	1			
Parental Interaction	.780**	.780**	1		

Critical Reflectivity

Reflection exhibits a true sense of analysis, and when it involves an individual's own practices, it definitely enhances the individual's critical thinking. Reflecting on oneself enables unlearning problematic areas and relearning the required patterns, which is undoubtedly a critical process and enhances critical reflectivity among ECE teachers as they engage in reflective practices that support professional development.

Participant C shares,

“Reflective practice and systematic self-analysis have enhanced my ability to critically reflect as part of my professional growth. I now deliberately analyze my assumptions, teaching choices, and how they influence children's learning.”

The participant understood the need to opt for self-analysis as a reflective practice, which taught the teacher to use a critical lens on individual assumptions and their effects on children and on professional growth. This lens provided the teacher with the opportunity to reflect critically and adapt for improvement, benefiting both the teacher and the children in early childhood education.

Participant A shares;

“Engaging in professional development rooted in reflective practice has enhanced my ability to critically evaluate my beliefs, actions, and teaching methods. Through continuous self-reflection, I am now able to implement more intentional and evidence-based improvements in my teaching.”

The teacher encouraged the use of reflective practices as a foundation for professional development, as critical reflection provides an opportunity to examine beliefs, the actions grounded in those beliefs, and the teaching methodologies adopted in light of them. The continuous, intentional efforts provide sufficient evidence to support the methodologies. This is the actual professional growth that strengthens the individual to reflect on personal practices and amend them, taking a further step toward self-improvement.

Evidence Based Practices

Organizing and documenting children's learning provides clarity in their learning progress. The more organized the documentation of children's learning at the ECE level is, the more opportunities there are for improvement, as the early years are crucial for children to understand their potential and true selves (Rashid & Aurangzeb, 2025). If children's progress is not documented, there would be no evidence of their improvement.

Participant Z says;

“Organized documentation of children's learning allows me to critically reflect on their developmental progress and evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching strategies. These records inform my planning, assessment, and responsive pedagogical choices.”

Participant S says;

“Reflecting on documented observations reinforces my use of evidence based documentation of children's learning in and outside the classroom. It makes me more professional in presenting my efforts with children in an organized manner.”

Documenting children's learning not only enhances children's performance but also helps a teacher identify areas for improvement, from planning to the design of assessment practices. The response to the assessment provides a pedagogical improvement guideline that can only be applied if all evidence is aligned for the sake of improvement and individual professional development and growth.

Collaborative Partnership

Interaction with the parents of early childhood children is a prerequisite for initiating improvement for children, as a combined team effort. Children spend limited time in academic settings and have a very different routine at home. Every child has a different home context, and sometimes this needs to be communicated to the teacher for the child's benefit. Working as a team enhances teachers' professional development and helps

them engage with parents professionally. Communicating teachers' concerns with parents in a professional manner enhances their professional development.

Participant W says;

"I learn new ways to support children by sharing and receiving details from parents. Collaborating with parents improves my teaching practices and helps me reflect on my areas of improvement as an ECE teacher."

Participant A shares;

"Building relationships with parents is an important part of my professional learning. Variation in experiences enables me to handle multiple contexts and children's needs."

Teachers who collaborate with parents better understand children's needs. Being a team with parental support for children's improvement in their learning and development process enhances a teacher's ability to cater to relevant circumstances in the future, and this is what professional development is all about: learning through one scenario and aligning with different situations of relevance.

Quantitative Analysis and Qualitative Results

Table 4

Quantitative and qualitative results

Sr.No.	Teacher Reflective Practices	P value	Extracted Themes for Professional Development
01	Self-Analysis	<.001	Critical Reflectivity
02	Documentation of Learning	<.001	Evidence Based Practices
03	Parental Interaction	<.001	Collaborative Partnership

Discussion

The study aimed to identify the relationship between teachers' reflective practices and their professional development. The results are evident: when teachers incorporate reflective practices in early childhood educational settings, such as self-assessment, documentation of children's records, and interaction with parents, they enhance their professional development opportunities. Reflective practices provide opportunities for early childhood teachers to align their use of reflective practices with their professional development. The more a teacher relies on themselves in the teaching and learning process, the more they can grow professionally, as openness to self-correction is also an aspect of professional development.

The qualitative part of the study also supports the quantitative results, as a strong significance of teacher reflective practices enhances the professional development of the early childhood teachers. The more frequently teachers use these techniques to improve their teaching strategies, the more effective they are at enhancing their professional role in early childhood. The reflective practices include self-assessment, documentation of learning, and parental interaction; all three dimensions are equally reliable and beneficial for a developmental perspective.

Early childhood requires close observation and mutual bonding between teachers and parents to better understand children and their needs. This not only enriches a teacher's teaching skills and techniques but also promotes equity. Documentation of children's learning also provides evidence and records to assess progress, allowing the teacher to reassess the teaching pedagogy if required improvement has not taken place. The

opportunity to self-assess for teachers at the early childhood level is remarkable, enhancing their pedagogical expertise and providing space to reflect on their teaching. Assessment without being called out is the best opportunity for improvement, and when teachers can assess themselves, it brings out the best in them by identifying their own areas for improvement. All these reflective practices enhance the professional development of teachers working in early childhood education.

Conclusion

Early childhood is one of the most crucial periods in children's lives, and teachers working at this stage need to understand the academic impact on children. It is evident that ECE teachers' use of reflective practices enhances opportunities for their professional development. The use of reflective practices at the ECE level provided clear evidence, preserving both the representation of data in quantifiable measures and the voices of the participants. Both results portray significant professional development with the use of reflective practices. There are many other reflective practices, but the study is limited to three main ones: self-assessment, documentation of learning, and parental interaction. Teachers learn more ways to document children's observations and relevant details through varied documentation methods. This shows a child's progress regularly and highlights areas for improvement. Parental interaction helps them better understand children and their fears, which need more focus and improvement. Analyzing self-practice also gives teachers a broader opportunity to learn about their performance and improve at their own pace and according to their own needs. Undoubtedly, a teacher will be professionally developed by incorporating these reflective practices into their teaching and interactions in early childhood. And the participating teachers' reflections provides evidence of improved professional development.

Recommendations

The study's findings established a positive relationship between teachers' use of reflective practices and their professional development in early childhood. The discussed reflective practices can be incorporated at different levels in academic settings, particularly at the primary level, as children under 10 need careful observation of their skills, behaviors, and attributes. Documenting their skills can enhance their potential. Teachers' self-analysis and parental interaction at the primary level would be effective for children. The results can be disseminated to teachers at the ECE level in both public and private school administrations to inform a further improvement plan for teachers' professional development.

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