

How Reflective Teachers Create Lively Classrooms

P Sathishkumar

‘Reflective practice’ can seem abstract, thereby difficult and even unnecessary. Reflection, at its core, is simply about paying attention to our own teaching: what worked, what did not, and why. When teachers reflect, they become more aware, more responsive, and more confident. Their classrooms become spaces of curiosity.



Figure 1: Students observing and drawing how shadows move every hour under the sun. (This is an AI-assisted image.)

During my work with primary school teachers, I have seen how deeply they care about their students, yet how little time they have to reflect on their own teaching methods. Between lesson plans, paperwork, and managing large classes, reflection often feels like a luxury. On the other hand, small moments of reflection—writing a few lines in a notebook, a lunchtime discussion with a colleague, or even a quiet thought while sitting in the staffroom after class—can bring real change in a teacher’s confidence and classroom practice.

A few years ago, during a workshop with teachers, I met Ms Rahana, a class III teacher, who sat at the back, quietly listening. During one session, I instructed the teachers to recall a classroom moment that had stayed with them; something that went unexpectedly well or did not go as planned. Ms Rahana hesitated, then shared a story about

an activity in a science classroom in which her students struggled to understand how shadows changed as the position of the sun changed.

‘First, I thought they had not listened carefully,’ she said, ‘but then, I realised I had shown it too quickly.’ As she reflected further, she explained that she had demonstrated the activity once and moved on, without giving children time to observe how the shadow changed at different times of the day. The children were expected to understand a concept that required slow observation and repeated engagement. This realisation helped her see that the difficulty was not with the children’s attention, but with the way the activity was structured.

When I asked what she would do differently the next time if the same lesson is taught, she smiled and said, ‘I would

let them observe and draw their shadows under the Sun every hour for a better understanding.’

That moment stayed with me. It was not just a story about a science lesson; it was about a teacher reflecting on her own practice clearly, without judgment, with just curiosity. A week later, Ms Rahana sent me some photos of drawings her students had made. When I saw them, I could imagine the students’ excitement in drawing the outlines of their shadows on the ground.

What reflection really means

‘Reflective practice’ can seem abstract, thereby difficult and even unnecessary. Reflection, at its core, is simply about paying attention to our own teaching: what worked, what did not, and why. Teachers can do this simply by asking themselves the following questions:

- What surprised me or made me think?
- What will I try differently next time?
- What did I notice in my classroom today?

These questions take just about five minutes for us to respond to ourselves. When teachers write down their responses regularly in their diaries, they begin to notice patterns:

- Which activities engage children
- When do they lose attention
- How simple changes can make a big difference

Another powerful form of reflection happens when teachers share their classroom experiences with one another. During a cluster-level meeting, I asked teachers to bring a short story or example from their classrooms. One teacher, Ramesh, spoke about how he encouraged students to write letters to their favourite animals after a lesson on wildlife. The idea made the class lively, he said, and even the quiet students participated.

When Ramesh shared this, another teacher, Suma, said she tried a similar activity in her class—asking her students to write letters to trees on the school ground. Soon, the discussion grew into a lively exchange of ideas. The energy in the room changed: teachers were no longer active listeners to the trainer; they were learning from one another.

That day reminded me that reflection does not always have to be a solitary activity or practice. When teachers speak openly about their experiences — successes and failures alike—they build a shared pool of wisdom that no textbook or manual can replace.

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How teacher educators can help

Reflection is not always easy. Teachers feel they have no time or that the school does not encourage open discussions. Some teachers feel that admitting their mistakes might be seen as a weakness. This is exactly why reflection matters and needs to be supported. It gives teachers ownership over their learning. It turns everyday classroom moments into opportunities for learning and, thereby, personal growth.

For example, a teacher may realise after a lesson that only a few children answered questions while others remained silent. Reflecting on this, the teacher may decide to use pair discussion or group work the next day so that more children get a chance to speak. Such small changes, rooted in reflection, directly improve student participation and understanding. When a teacher takes five minutes after class to ask: ‘What did my students really learn today?’ it strengthens the entire teaching-learning process.

The role of the teacher educator is not to ‘train’ teachers in the traditional sense, but to create conditions where they feel safe to think and talk about their practices. During school visits, I begin by simply asking, ‘Tell me about something that went well in your class this week.’

This simple question opens up rich conversations. Teachers talk about their ‘aha’ moments, such as a shy child answering confidently, a group activity that turned out well, or a creative display made from old charts. From there, we slowly move to what did not go so well, and what could be tried next. For instance, a teacher may share that a worksheet-based activity did not engage students, leading to restlessness. Through discussion, the teacher might decide to replace it with a hands-on task or a discussion-based approach the next time. Another teacher may realise that instructions were unclear and decide to model the task more explicitly in future lessons.

Reflection needs to be supported. We need to help teachers learn from their own experience. It is not an instructional practice.

Reflection as a habit

Over the years, I have seen teachers who once resisted reflection begin to embrace it. Some teachers maintain diaries where they jot down two or three lines every day. Others form small groups that meet at specific intervals to share classroom stories. A few teachers encourage their students to reflect by asking them, 'What did you enjoy in your learning today?'

Reflection slowly becomes part of the school culture, where teachers begin to look forward to sharing their experiences. This happens when reflection is given space during staff meetings, cluster meetings, or informal conversations, and when teachers feel safe to speak without fear of judgment. Over time, teachers begin to see reflection not as an additional task, but as a natural part of their work. Classrooms become more experimental, more alive.

Closing thoughts

In one of my workshops, I asked Ms Magathi, a teacher of class IV, how her class was going. She said, 'I keep writing about my lessons. When I read my old notes, I see how much I've changed.' She explained that earlier she depended heavily on textbooks and teacher talk, but over time, her notes showed a shift towards more student

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interaction, group activities, and questioning. This helped her recognise her own professional growth. Her words captured the spirit of reflection perfectly—it is not about being perfect, but about noticing growth.

When teachers reflect, they become more aware, more responsive, and more confident. Their classrooms become spaces of curiosity. Reflection does not need special time or tools; it only needs attention and honesty.

Teachers carry countless stories—of lessons that worked beautifully, and of those that could have been better. Within these stories lie the seeds of professional growth. Reflection is a quiet conversation with oneself; an act of pausing and learning. It may be a note at the end of the day, a chat with a colleague, or a question asked in stillness; every moment of reflection strengthens the teacher from within.

Translated from Hindi. Translator: Dawangara Umat Vetter: Simran Luthra



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