

Practicum Training of Students in Special Education. A Theoretical Review of Reflective Strategies and Instruments

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Abstract. This theoretical review examines the central role of reflective strategies and instruments in practicum training for undergraduate students in Special Education. Practicum experiences serve as a critical bridge between theoretical concepts or models and the complex realities of working with children with diverse learning, behavioral, and communication needs. Across literature, reflective practice emerges as a multidimensional process that supports professional growth by deepening students' understanding of educational decisions, fostering self-awareness, and strengthening developing professional identities. Foundational forms of reflection - including reflective thinking, reflective writing, guided dialogue, and the use of reflective logs - enable student teachers to critically interpret classroom experiences, confront challenges, and integrate theoretical knowledge with situated practice. Research consistently highlights reflective thinking as a catalyst for analyzing educational events, questioning assumptions, and linking experience to broader educational principles. Mentoring and collaborative dialogue further enhance reflective engagement by providing intellectual, emotional, and contextual support. Among reflective instruments, structured reflective logs hold value as diagnostic and developmental tools, helping students articulate their learning, examine their beliefs, and set goals for improvement. The review also notes that reflective writing requires explicit scaffolding, including modelling, guided practice, and clear criteria, to cultivate depth and consistency. Overall, the findings emphasize that practicum training is most effective when reflective strategies are intentionally inserted, systematically supported, and collaboratively enacted. Such practices contribute to the development of independent, critically minded practitioners capable of engaging in the complexities of Special Education and sustaining ongoing professional growth.

Keywords: reflective practice, practicum training, Special Education, reflective logs, teacher education.

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INTRODUCTION. STRUCTURE OF PRACTICUM TRAINING

Undergraduate practicum training for students enrolled in Special Education programs provides opportunities to develop the competencies needed for a range of specialized professions they may pursue after graduation or through postgraduate and in-service preparation, including special education teacher, speech and language therapist, special educator, support teacher, and educational counsellor. As students enter their practicum experience, they are guided by specific strategies, techniques, and approaches that blend theoretical learning with practical, hands-on engagement. Among these, reflection-based strategies hold particular importance because they deepen students' understanding of what to observe, how to focus their professional growth, and how to interpret their emerging sense of professional identity and responsibility. The reflective practices integrated into the practicum include reflective writing - linked to self-awareness and personal development as students articulate their thoughts and emotions while exploring personal limits (Wright, 2018); reflective thinking - centered on relating, experimenting, exploring, and connecting theoretical knowledge with practical experience (Hathazi & Serban, 2022; Helyer, 2015); reflective logs - used to document the reflection process; and active listening, complemented by individual or group mentoring sessions. Throughout their practicum and mentoring activities, students are encouraged to develop the skills necessary for assessing and supporting children with disabilities. In doing so, they learn to address questions such as: How do I begin? What should I focus on first? What is happening in this context? Is this approach appropriate? Is behavior a form of communication? How does the child learn? How can I better understand and respond to the child's needs and interests?

The practicum aims to cultivate students' professional responsibilities through targeted assignments and objectives, including building strong mentor relationships, reflecting on teaching, producing documents and resources, observing communication with families, participating in the professional community, and engaging in ongoing professional development (Machost & Stains, 2023). Through the implementation of reflective strategies, all parties involved contribute to the development of reflective practitioners - individuals who critically examine, reorganize, and reconsider their planning, observations, and interpretations. As students strengthen their reflective abilities, they learn to integrate others' perspectives into their own practice and experience (Tyler, Boldi, & Cherubini, 2022). For teachers and mentors, this process involves drawing on their expertise to understand how students learn and communicate, fostering the trust and openness needed to build a supportive mentoring relationship.

Reflective thinking in practicum training

Reflective thinking represents a foundational approach within teacher education programs, functioning as a key mechanism for supporting professional development during practicum training. Early conceptualizations of reflective practice, particularly those advanced by John Dewey (1933), established the groundwork for understanding the qualities and dispositions of reflective professionals. Within educational contexts, the primary goal of reflective practice is to foster teachers' capacity to reason about their instructional decisions - why particular strategies are chosen and how teaching can be refined to positively influence student learning outcomes (Lee, 2005). In parallel, the practicum serves as a structured bridge between theory and practice, offering student teachers regular, supervised opportunities to apply and evaluate their knowledge, skills, and attitudes within authentic school environments (Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996). Building on this perspective, Damon (1992) contends that the practicum's central purpose is to surface problems and issues that prompt the exploration of relevant theories and professional knowledge, positioning practice itself as the organizing core of the curriculum.

Reflective thinking enables student teachers to critically examine experiences through the lens of their evolving understandings, thereby maximizing learning in real-world contexts. Practicum training thus encourages them to apply theoretical principles and pedagogical skills, progressively developing competencies through diverse classroom experiences and gaining insight into the realities of professional practice. This process allows student teachers to assess their readiness for a teaching career, evaluate their improvement, and identify topics requiring further personal or professional development (Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996).

A recurring theme in the literature concerns the shifting perceptions of preparedness that student teachers experience as they progress through practicum and internship placements. While many preservice teachers initially feel confident due to prior coursework or general exposure to educational theories, the feedback they provide at the conclusion of their training often reveals a more nuanced and self-critical perspective. This shift highlights a growing awareness of the complexities inherent in teaching environments, including the dynamics of teacher-student relationships, the diverse needs of children, and the challenges of managing difficult behaviors. Such developments suggest that the practical realities encountered during fieldwork often expose gaps that are not evident in theoretical preparation alone. The emotionally charged nature of unfamiliar experiences further contributes to a decrease in perceived readiness. Whereas theoretical study may instill a sense of readiness, the practical application

of this knowledge frequently reveals educational challenges and situational nuances that theory alone cannot fully address. The heightened expectations associated with meeting diverse learners' needs during the internship may also contribute to reduced confidence. If this is the case, it should not be interpreted as regression. Instead, it reflects the emergence of deeper critical self-awareness. Li et al. (2025) argue that teacher education programs must support more effectively the transition from theory to practice by providing structured mentorship and sustained opportunities for self-growth as preservice teachers move from academic understanding to professional application. Practicum programs are therefore encouraged to cultivate reflective and critical thinking, enabling student teachers to evaluate their performance and actively pursue continuous improvement. In this sense, Tripp and Rich (2012) conceptualize reflection as a critical, analytical process through which teachers assess the effects of their instructional resolutions within specific contexts to enhance practice. Similarly, Ryan (2013) views reflection as an effort to understand experience concerning oneself, others, and environmental conditions, while reimagining and shaping expectations for personal and collective purposes.

Research consistently stresses the significance of reflection, self-worth, and training in classroom organization as integral components of teacher education (Harlin, 2014; Kong, 2010; Yuksel, 2014). For instance, Kong (2010) examined the effects of a video system on student teachers' capacity for self-reflection and found that video browsing yielded more extensive and deeper reflective notes, particularly in areas such as classroom management and professional teaching knowledge. These enhanced reflections also provided a strong foundation for meaningful professional dialogue with mentors. Complementary studies further demonstrate a positive connection among teachers' self-reflection, coursework in organizational teaching issues, and their sense of self-value (Bullock, Coplan, & Bosacki, 2015; Patterson & Seabrookes-Blackmore, 2017).

More recent research further advances understanding of how reflective practice can be deliberately fostered within teacher education. Minott (2025) proposes the Reflective Approach to Teaching Practicum Debriefing (RATPD), a structured and cognitively informed framework intended to scaffold student teachers' reflective processes and strengthen the connection between educational theory and the lived complexities of classroom teaching. Reflective teaching usually employs the following cognitive dimensions: the capacity to identify, explain, and critically evaluate teaching episodes as a basis for future improvement; the use of self-directed inquiry and critical thinking to build context-sensitive professional knowledge; and the ability to challenge assumptions, explore multiple courses of action, engage in higher-order thinking, and reflect consciously

on self-learning. Equally important in this process is how teachers draw on personal experience, ethical considerations, and professional judgment to make sense of their practice.

Reflective teaching is also understood as a social and collaborative endeavor. It requires openness to sharing ideas, exchanging feedback, and engaging in collective dialogue, as well as the capacity to navigate uncertainties related to personal teaching beliefs and perceptions of competence. These perspectives position reflective thinking not merely as an individual cognitive exercise but as a socially situated, dialogic, and structured process that plays a central role in shaping teachers' emerging professional identities.

A critical dimension of practicum training involves supporting student teachers to translate theoretical knowledge of reflection into practical, actionable processes (Resch & Schrittester, 2021). Wong (2016) emphasizes that reflection enhances learning by shaping how students perceive and make meaning from practicum experiences. He observes that challenges - such as self-doubt, questions about identity, or daily struggles - often generate insights and deeper reflection, allowing student teachers to articulate and interpret their experiences for professional and personal growth. By critically examining these emotional and pedagogical challenges, student teachers deepen their self-knowledge and develop resilience toward the inherent complexities of teaching. Mentors play a vital role in helping student teachers process these challenges. By situating reflective discussions within the broader school community, mentors offer support in contextualizing experiences and alignment with professional norms and expectations.

Finally, the effectiveness of practicum training is strengthened when teachers and mentors share responsibility with student teachers and collaborate to build trusting relationships (Corrigan & Chapman, 2008). Teachers must strive to be trustworthy professionals (Trelstad, 2008), creating safe and supportive learning environments in which student teachers feel encouraged to engage in reflective dialogue and openly explore their developing practices. A trusting, collaborative environment thus forms the foundation for meaningful reflection, enabling student teachers to explore, express, and refine their emerging professional identities.

Reflective learning strategies used in practicum training

Reflective practice is conceptualized as a continuous, participatory process that enhances the quality of teacher education experiences (Machost & Stains, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2022). It typically involves an iterative cycle comprising

reflection, planning for future action, acting, and evaluating outcomes, thus embedding elements of problem solving, action orientation, and critical inquiry (Mohamed et al., 2022). A substantial body of research demonstrates that reflective practice has the potential to strengthen critical thinking and decision-making processes (Baporikar, 2021; Wilson et al., 2022), particularly when grounded in real professional experiences. Its significance also lies in its capacity to foster learning, growth, and ongoing professional development (Friedland, 2015; Harvey & Vlachopoulos, 2020; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2018).

Within teacher professional development, reflective practice is regarded as an essential component of effective training programs. It enables teachers to critically evaluate their instructional strategies and align their educational choices with students' needs (Borko, 2004). Studies on comprehensive professional development initiatives further suggest that the integration of reflective practice enhances teachers' subject knowledge and reinforces their ability to manage diverse classroom contexts (Garet et al., 2001). Recent trends highlight an increasing emphasis on technology-enhanced learning and collaborative professional communities, both of which complement reflective practice by encouraging teachers to initiate thoughtful dialogue about education and scrutinize their approaches to classroom management.

From the perspective of student teacher education, reflective practice is critical for training aspiring educators with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective teaching. The transition from student teacher status to beginner teacher status is frequently marked by challenges related to behavior management, building relations with the learners, planning the activities and the transition between them, and support learner diversity. Given the complexities of early career teaching, it is argued that reflective practices during this transition must be intentional and targeted (Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021). Reflective practice for student teachers typically includes recollection of experiences, exercising reflection while conducting an activity, making a reflection in retrospect of the teaching activity, and participating in mentoring or peer discussion processes that facilitate the construction of personal theories of teaching (Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021).

However, research indicates that student teachers often encounter difficulties in relating their reflections to theoretical frameworks. Many tend to focus on identifying problems or describing instructional processes without recognizing the theoretical underpinnings of their actions or the implications for curriculum development. As a result, they may not demonstrate sustained critical reflection (Matengu et al., 2021; Jones & Ryan, 2014). Structured reflective activities, including journaling, feedback sessions, and coursework-linked reflection tasks, have been shown to nurture self-awareness and professional development

(Harford & MacRuairc, 2008; Malicay, 2023). These practices support pre-service teachers in scrutinizing the values, beliefs, and attitudes they bring to teaching (Anand & Gangmei, 2023), thereby contributing to the integration of theory and practice.

To promote deeper reflection, practicum training should incorporate strategies that expose student teachers to new ideas and encourage them to translate theory into innovative pedagogical approaches (White, 2009). Enhancing instructional competencies - such as classroom management, teaching strategies, and student engagement - allows teachers to put theoretical concepts in educational environments, thereby strengthening their understanding of teaching in authentic contexts (Anand & Gangmei, 2023; Malicay, 2023). Given that teaching and learning processes are interdependent, mentorship and tutoring sessions should be designed to support reflective engagement. Effective mentoring practices include asking purposeful questions, prompting student teachers to articulate experiences in relation to theory, modelling complex reflective thinking, guiding decision making about classroom practices, creating meaningful assessments, and emphasizing individual contributions (Szabo & Schwartz, 2011; Hibbard et al., 2010; Means et al., 2010).

Li (2025) identifies tutorial sessions and reflective journals as strategies for examining the impact of reflective practice on pedagogical skill development, professional competence, and readiness to navigate diverse educational settings. The findings suggest that tutoring experiences contribute to greater teaching competence, increased responsibility, and the development of teacher identities. These results align with studies demonstrating that reflective practice and mentoring support a deeper understanding of educational practices (Winchester & Winchester, 2014; Massey & Lewis, 2011) and foster professional identity formation (Pillen et al., 2013; Trent, 2010; Findlay, 2006).

Reflective strategies have a central role in practicum training programs aimed at cultivating autonomous, reflective practitioners. Its development is reinforced through structured activities such as reflective teaching journals and the gathering of peer or student feedback, which help pre-service teachers acquire critical teaching competencies. Mentors must therefore provide explicit guidance to highlight that reflective activities are focused and aligned with professional development goals. One influential framework in this regard is the three-part reflective framework (Loughran, 2002; Freese, 1999), which involves anticipatory reflection (planning and reasoning before teaching), contemporaneous reflection (decision making while teaching), and retrospective reflection (post-lesson analysis). This framework structures mentor-student teacher interactions by promoting open discussion, encouraging questioning, fostering observation of real-time decision making, and engaging in shared post-lesson reflection.

Collaborative work is also underscored as essential within practicum contexts, as it contributes significantly to the development of professional competence (Lozano Cabezas et al., 2022; Raduan & Na, 2020). Collaborative reflection enables student teachers to embed reflective attitudes into their ongoing academic and professional growth (Bas, 2022) and to sustain such practices even in the absence of explicit role models. Collaborative reflection sessions additionally cultivate a shared learning culture and strengthen professional development communities (Li, 2025).

Reflective logs as purposeful instruments in practicum training

Reflective logs are generally understood as written tasks that require learners to articulate and analyze their experiences through reflective thinking (Moon, 2004). Their use is well established across practice-based learning environments, including teacher education (Korthagen, 2011). The primary function of reflective logs is to cultivate students' critical and reflective thinking by encouraging systematic attention to how they analyze their own actions, recognize their development, and formulate future goals (Lee & Gyogi, 2016). According to Moon (2004), the reflective process that structures these logs typically unfolds in a series of stages: description and timeline establishment, integration of additional ideas, reflective analysis through observations or questions, deeper processing such as generating or testing new interpretations, and the eventual production of the written account.

Within teacher education practicum settings, reflective logs serve as a mechanism for student teachers to assess their learning, identify difficulties, and consider strategies for improvement. They also provide space for examining and potentially reshaping pre-existing beliefs and assumptions. Although reflective logs have limitations - such as variable depth of reflection and reliance on students' willingness to be candid - Lee and Gyogi (2016) emphasize that they nonetheless offer access to learners' perspectives that might otherwise remain inaccessible to instructors. For mentors and practicum coordinators, these logs function as diagnostic tools that reveal students' understanding, progress, and challenges, thereby enabling personalized and timely feedback.

Research further demonstrates that reflective logs contribute to the development of complex, often interdisciplinary competencies, such as deep information processing (Temple, 2001). They support awareness of professional dispositions, values, and knowledge, which are foundational in teacher preparation. Moreover, reflective writing helps student teachers interpret emotional and behavioral responses and to recognize the personal significance of their practicum

experiences. Effective integration of reflective logs into practicum programs therefore requires deliberate instructional design, including explicit planning of reflective activities, structured opportunities for reflection before, during, and after practicum events, and the creation of an institutional culture that values reflective practice (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996).

Reflective logs may be implemented in diverse formats, from printed templates to digital platforms such as online blogs. Their content can include standard or context-specific questions, commentary on selected behaviors or incidents, descriptions from the perspective of an external observer, or open-ended reflections blending accounts of observed activities with personal insights (Trif & Popescu, 2013). Online platforms additionally allow instructors to regulate submission timelines by controlling the opening and closing of entries, thereby ensuring continuous engagement - a key element in developing reflective capacity (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). Although Lucas and Fleming (2012) didn't find differences in the quality or depth of reflection among online and paper journals, students often expressed a preference for hard-copy formats.

Given that reflective writing is not an intuitive skill for most novice teachers (Epp, 2008; Spalding & Wilson, 2002), explicit instruction is essential for meaningful engagement in reflective learning (Munchy, 2014). Studies show that targeted training can substantially enhance students' perceived ability to reflect (McInnis-Bowers, Chew, & Bowers, 2010). Such training may include familiarizing students with the format of logs, clarifying the purpose of reflective writing so that both the "how" and the "why" are understood (Sharma, 2010), modelling reflective thinking through examples and structured assignments with gradually reduced scaffolding (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010), and articulating clear assessment criteria, as students often express uncertainty about evaluative expectations (McGarr & Moody, 2010).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Practicum training in Special Education represents a critical formative space in which theoretical knowledge, practical experience, and professional identity intersect. This review highlights the central role of reflective strategies and instruments in mediating this intersection, demonstrating that reflective practice - whether expressed through reflective thinking, guided dialogue, or structured writing - serves as the conceptual and pedagogical core of practicum learning. Across literature, reflective engagement emerges as both a cognitive and relational process: it enables student teachers to interpret their instructional decisions, confront the complexities of real educational environments, and

cultivate the dispositions of autonomous, ethically grounded practitioners. Through structured cycles of observation, analysis, and action, students develop deeper awareness of their strengths, limitations, and evolving professional responsibilities.

The reviewed studies consistently affirm that reflection is indispensable for supporting the transition from theoretical preparation to situated professional practice. Practicum experiences frequently disrupt initial confidence, revealing gaps between academic knowledge and the nuanced realities of working with children with diverse communication, behavioral, and learning needs. Rather than signaling inadequacy, these shifts indicate the emergence of critical self-awareness and the internalization of professional standards. Reflective strategies - particularly those embedded in mentoring, feedback discussions, and collaborative learning communities - help student teachers make sense of challenges, contextualize them within broader educational principles, and generate informed pathways for improvement.

Equally, instruments such as reflective logs provide essential scaffolding for translating experiential learning into purposeful professional growth. When integrated intentionally into practicum programs, logs function as diagnostic, developmental, and metacognitive tools that deepen students' analytical capacities and support mentors in tailoring guidance. The literature stresses that reflective writing is not innate; thus, explicit instruction, modelled examples, and clear evaluative criteria are necessary to cultivate meaningful engagement and sustained reflective habits.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that practicum training is most effective when reflective strategies are deliberately embedded, systematically supported, and collaboratively enacted. By fostering environments characterized by trust, dialogue, and critical inquiry, teacher education programs can strengthen the development of reflective practitioners - professionals capable of navigating complexity, responding thoughtfully to learners' needs, and continually refining their educational expertise.

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