
Book Review

'The Reflective Teacher': A Review and Some Reflections

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The Reflective Teacher: Case Studies of Action Research

Neeraja Raghavan (2016)

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'The reflective teacher' is a phrase that has been much in vogue in education circles for at least the past two decades. At the outset this may evoke a hazy image of a somewhat thoughtful teacher one might be happy to see teaching in our schools. The phrase became common currency sometime after the publication, in 1983, of Donald Schon's *The Reflective Practitioner*. This influential book, sub-titled *How Professionals Think in Action*, characterized in considerable detail and depth the creative ways in which skilled practitioners in diverse other professions—such as engineering, architecture, town planning, psychotherapy and management—identify, frame, think through and act upon issues or problems that emerge in the course of their practice.

Considerably earlier than Schon, as early as 1933, John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, in his book, *How We Think*, had developed an account of human processes of problem-posing and problem-solving that result in productive thinking in various domains of human experience. Dewey too had proposed that it is only through a process of 'reflection on experience', that our experience may result in an enriched understanding and personally validated practical knowhow. Such reflection, Dewey suggested, is akin to a form of 'scientific thinking' applied to everyday life situations, but with the added dimensions of value and purpose. Building on these ideas, Schon developed a more detailed account of what he termed as 'reflection-in action', which he maintained is necessarily an intuitive, iterative, non-linear and often cyclical process, that may can be active even as we go about engaging in our practice. Through this reflection, individuals may challenge closely held assumptions, and deepen their grasp

and engagement with the complexity of life situations, characterized as they are by 'uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts'.

The ideas from Schon's book were quickly picked up by practitioners of school education and teacher educators, who saw them as highly relevant to the teaching profession. Teaching—which has often been narrowly viewed in instrumental terms as simply 'delivery of content'—was acknowledged as being a multi-layered engagement with living, thinking persons in complex social and institutional contexts, towards educational purposes and aims that are value-laden. Critical reflection and imaginative responses to situations that arise in the course of one's own teaching practice were considered as essential for 'good teaching'. A plethora of writings emerged from the late 1980s onwards upto the present day, focussing on the qualities of reflective teaching, and proposing a variety of approaches to developing 'reflective teachers'.

In the Krishnamurti schools too the process of education, of teaching, learning and upbringing, is necessarily viewed as a multi-layered extended engagement, drawing upon many levels of the being of a teacher and the students. Teaching is seen as not just a profession, but also as a way of life, with an undeniable impact on the way individual students grow up and respond to the challenges of living a wholesome life in complex and difficult times. Informed by the teachings of Krishnamurti, these schools especially value 'self-awareness', 'the quality of attention', 'observation' as well as 'reflective abilities' in a teacher.

However, to most people in schools the idea of a 'reflective teacher' may be a vaguely held notion and it is hardly ever articulated in explicit terms. We may ask: What is the nature of reflections that a teacher might engage in? How does the reflective teacher relate with students, the subjects s(he) teaches, the teaching-learning process, and the predicaments s(he) finds herself confronted with in the course of her/his life as a teacher and a human being? And more to the point, if this is such a desirable quality, what could possibly make for 'reflective practice' in a teacher? Neeraja Raghavan's recent publication, *The Reflective Teacher: Case Studies of Action Research* brings these questions into sharp focus. Drawing from a wide range of literature on the subject, but especially from Schon and Dewey (stimulating quotes from both are liberally sprinkled throughout the book!), it provides a series of textured responses to these questions.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which is appropriately cross-referenced with the others. Each section could very well be read by

itself to begin with, but arouses curiosity to delve into all the other sections. The first section provides a detailed background: it unfolds a well-researched account of the many-layered nature of 'reflection' in a teacher's practice, as well as the meaning, purpose and process of 'action-research'. Action research is described as a step-by-step process in which the teacher: 1) identifies a significant problem to which she is seeking a solution; 2) analyzes the problem; 3) comes up with alternative strategies to address the problem; 4) identifies the most promising strategy; 5) implements the strategy; 6) reviews the effectiveness of the strategy; and 7) further refines her approach to the problem. This could then lead to a further cycle of research, in which the teacher's reflections may lead her to question her own initial assumptions and framing of the problem.

This first section also introduces the reader to the setting of an extended study, where the author and her team facilitated a process by which a group of eight teachers conducted action research into a wide range of issues in their respective classrooms at a school run by the Azim Premji Foundation near Dehradun, Uttarakhand. These teachers ranged from being 'very experienced', to 'moderately experienced' to relatively 'new to teaching'; they taught a range of subjects in primary classes: languages, mathematics, science and environmental studies; and all had volunteered to participate, albeit for somewhat different reasons, in the process of conducting action research. The facilitators introduced them to the stages of action research, helped them identify the problems they were most concerned about, provided occasional guidance in addressing these problems, and supported them when needed in documenting their experiences. The major thesis of the book is that by learning to conduct systematic action research into problems that they themselves identify as being significant, teachers can indeed become more reflective in their practice.

The second section documents the narratives of each of the teachers who volunteered to take part in the study. It paints a 'working portrait' of each of the teachers and his/her concerns, and gives an account of the problems or issues they tried to address through action research, as well as their learnings from this effort. Here is a sampler of the action research problems that the teachers had identified:

- How to increase vocabulary and reading abilities in English for students of class 4?
- How does one teach children of class 6 'how we see' and help them overcome misconceptions about 'sight'?

- How to inculcate scientific temper in class 5 and 6 students?
- How to ensure an understanding of place value among a few children who did not have this concept even in class 6?
- How to teach environmental studies topics to a few students who did not have a background in Hindi, the language of instruction?

Through a process that was made more systematic (than they would have otherwise adopted on their own), all the teachers, to varying degrees, enlarged their repertoire of teaching methods, experienced shifts in their perceptions of children and their learning process, and were able to find a way forward in addressing the problems they had identified at the beginning. Many were very gratified by what they saw as higher levels of enthusiasm and engagement in their students. The teachers' own voices come through clearly in this section, as we get glimpses into their thought processes and journeys. We also hear the voices, albeit much more mutedly, of the facilitators who accompanied them.

The third section is intended to be evaluative and summarizing, including reflections on the 'reflection-in-action' as it was experienced in diverse ways by the teachers. It analyses the data presented in the previous section, examining the ways in which reflection might have been engendered in each of the teachers through the process of action research, and whether this had brought about shifts in the teacher's practice, and his/her understanding of children and learning. It notes that there are indeed multiple shifts that several teachers experienced, from, simply, a widening of their teaching strategies and repertoire, to deeper changes in their appreciation of children's capacities, their understanding of what is involved in, say, 'reading with meaning' or 'probing scientific questions', as well as their own purposes in teaching. In its concluding 'overview', while critically reviewing the shortcomings of the facilitation process and the study itself, this section underscores the efficacy of action research as a means of making for reflective practice in a teacher. The appendices provide some helpful tools and templates for those readers who might wish to embark on a similar journey. There is a very useful list of references provided.

Alongside the book, there is also a set of two DVDs available (which can be procured from the Azim Premji Foundation), that video-document some key features of the action research process. The DVDs include a culminating interview with each of the teachers who took part in the study. We are thus able to view and listen to each of the teachers speaking about their work, the

subjects they teach, their concerns for their students, the things they tried, what worked, what further remains to be done, as well as their challenges and learning from the action research process.

I see this book and the DVDs as an extremely valuable resource for all those who work in education and with schools, and especially for teacher educators. It could also be considered as essential reading for school administrators as well as thinking teachers interested in deepening their understanding and practice of teaching and learning. The book and the DVD both provide in-depth depictions of shifts that have taken place in real 'flesh and blood' teachers. These are teachers who have themselves had a very ordinary school education, and yet are becoming committed to their students and their genuine learning needs. It is evident that prior exposure to workshops with resource persons from Azim Premji Foundation had already whetted the appetite of some for doing things 'differently' from their own traditional schooling. But it is the process of participating in an institutional setting with a larger community of enquirers, many of whom were involved in the action research that generated a culture of discussion, documentation and reflection, which led over a period of time to actual movements in their practice.

The teachers who were already somewhat discontented with traditional approaches to teaching, are seen as being able to visualize novel strategies that enable their students to become active and fearless participants in the learning process. Even teachers who had hitherto been somewhat mechanical in their approach, begin to come alive to their students' capacity for learning and their overall well-being. Their concerns for specific children and the need to closely diagnose and respond to their individual situations come to the fore for some others. This is highly encouraging of the power of 'action research' in bringing about new initiatives and altered pedagogies in the classroom. There are deeper changes in habitual thought patterns, outlooks and approaches to education that are also indicated in some cases. The linking thread in all these accounts are processes of 'reflection' that we can sense these teachers having experienced during the journeys they have embarked upon.

If one were now to step back to reflect on the rich body of work and thesis that comprises this book, a few questions arise in the mind:

- What assumptions or view of human beings, of children, as well as of teachers as thinking-feeling beings, do the theorists and thinkers represented in the book appear to reflect?

- What aims of education does the overall frame of the book presuppose?
- Are there levels and forms of reflective inquiry that teachers might engage in, which are not within the scope of the form of ‘action research’ that the book proposes?
- What is the relationship between ‘reflection’, ‘attention’, ‘awareness’ and ‘observation’, and how might one complement or enrich the other?

I briefly explore this last question in the light of articles appearing elsewhere in this *Journal*, especially the very first article, titled *Attention and the Traffic of Thought*. In this article, speaking of ‘the quality of attention’, there is an arresting statement: “A moment of suspension is required, which is not merely the pause of *reflection*, necessary as this may be in its own time and place [emphasis mine].” And a little further on: “It is also applicable in daily life. By constant *attention* [emphasis mine] to our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, we create more and more the climate of change; we create for ourselves the opportunity to delve deeper and wider into ourselves.”

Connecting this with the preceding discussion on the subject of the book, it would seem that ‘reflection’ and ‘attention’ are both human capabilities that can operate powerfully in our daily lives. The first, reflection, requires a pause in activity, and a ‘bending or looking back’ (in its etymological meaning) to our thoughts and actions, evaluating them against particular ends-in-view. It is a movement in a continuum of deliberate ‘looking’—at *past* thought or action and its effects, through *present* thinking, with some *future* state of affairs imaginatively in mind. With ‘reflection’ we actively check ourselves and our actions, and remain open to the possibility of re-directing our available energies, re-setting our goals, and at times even re-framing the perspective which informs these. As human beings and teachers we certainly need to do this time and again, when we commit ourselves to meeting the needs of students as well as educational aims as we perceive them.

‘Attention’ involves ‘waiting’ and ‘stretching’ (again, in its etymological meanings). It is a stretching towards whatever there is ‘present’ in the surround. It involves a suspension of the deliberative thought-process, allowing ‘awareness’ and a clarifying ‘observation’ to reveal the surround, both the outer and the inner. Subtle patterns, features and shades of a whole situation, including one’s thinking and feeling—not apparent to the habitual or even the reflective mind—may come to be sensed. The space that opens within deepens the reach of the mind, dissolving that which is habitual,

releasing new energy. This may happen when one is alone or with nature, in conversation with another or even in a classroom with a group of students. In this movement, which is a non-movement of active thinking, lies the possibility of renewal, of affectionate comprehension of a situation, of new responses that are drawn forth, of change that is qualitatively significant, and which brings its own atmosphere of learning. This is perhaps the foundation of what Stephen Smith calls the 'attention curriculum'. This, however, cannot be a pre-set course to be run (in the etymological meaning of 'curriculum') by teacher or student; but a living engagement with moments that present themselves, into which may flow an energy capable of fully responding to the complexity of situations as they arise. Surely, this too is the need of the hour in education, teaching and learning.

In the end one is grateful that Schon's pioneering work has been brought to us, especially in the Indian context, in such a textured and concrete form by Neeraja Raghavan, for the value of 'reflective teaching' in our schools can never be minimized. As a summation, I see that 'reflective practice' can be a powerful means of moving towards more or less known ends in a given framework and context, when limiting assumptions and habitual thoughts and actions are uncovered and creatively transcended. This is demonstrated by many of the teachers who are the subject of this book. On the other hand, 'attentive practice' might be the quality of being fully present that allows for transcendence of any pre-set framework and context, and reveals as well as releases that which was hitherto *unknown*. Thus we cannot *know* as much about 'attention' and its operations as we do about 'reflection', except in stretching towards it again and again. In my mind's eye they remain distinctive, and complementary, facilities of the human mind.

And yet, just as Schon's work has provided a clear step forward in our understanding of the richness of teaching-learning through 'reflection' in multiple domains, could one not look ahead to a further revolution in our understanding of teaching-learning through 'attention' that Krishnamurti spoke about during his lifetime? (See the Krishnamurti passage at the beginning of this *Journal*). Perhaps the 'attentive and aware teacher' will then take her rightful place alongside the 'reflective teacher'.