

Fostering Connection through Core Reflection

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Abstract

How can educators harness their full potential and inspire the full potential of their students? How can one shift their perspective from a limiting mindset to a growth mindset? Core reflection is a contemplative technique that encourages positive self-talk, productive problem-solving, and strength-based thinking. The author is a secondary school teacher who conducted a study on the effects of core reflection on high school students. This reflective method was introduced to students over the first semester. Students were encouraged to engage with core reflection throughout the year, especially during times of high stress. Students reported an increased sense of control over their emotional reactions to events or interactions and a heightened sense of awareness of the strengths of themselves and their peers and teachers. This article presents the findings from this action research and introduces the basic concepts of core reflection that readers can immediately begin to apply to their daily lives to better engage with their full potential.

Keywords: *core reflection, teacher reflection, student voice, teacher education, teacher learning, contemplative practices*

Mrs. Morris stood dumbfounded in front of her high school math class. She could not understand how a lesson she had spent so much time preparing could go so terribly wrong. The students didn't seem to know how to solve any of the problems or even how to approach them. It didn't help that the students were acting particularly difficult today, but she was sure this lesson would run smoothly. Now, she wasn't sure she would even get through the first lesson objective, let alone the fun activity she had planned for the end of class to help the students further understand the material. She racked her brain, trying to decide

how to proceed. The students were getting antsy and she had to make a decision immediately, or she would lose their attention. With her voice slightly raised and harsh, she asked them to open their textbooks and read quietly. As she walked back to her desk, she felt one pang of emotion after the other, from guilt to anger to embarrassment. How had this happened?

The students stare at their teacher, Mrs. Morris, confused and unsure of what to do. They knew that the information she presented to them did not make sense, but it felt as if she was angry with

them for not understanding. They felt like it was their fault, somehow. When she raised her voice and asked them to open their books and read quietly, they felt belittled and stupid. In an attempt to alleviate these feelings, the students let their minds wander off of the current lesson and onto something else...

Most teachers have experienced a scenario like this at one point or another in their educational career. Every teacher has a different way of responding to the above situation: some would react like Mrs. Morris, others would abandon their lesson and follow their intuition, while still, others would blame their environment (the room was too hot/cold, the students were not paying attention that day, etc.). Nevertheless, it can be baffling to experience this, no matter how long you have been teaching.

Think briefly about what you would have done in the above situation.

For the past five years, I have utilized a simple reflective strategy in my teaching life, which has completely changed how I respond to unexpected situations in my classroom. Core Reflection is an approach to developing the human potential in teaching and learning (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2012). It focuses one's attention on positive attributes as solutions to problems and provides a way to assess and reflect in the moment. Using core reflection with oneself and with students can transform your reactions to a situation and the atmosphere in the room. When students and teachers begin the practice of positive reflection, it helps create a culture of respect in the classroom that school districts in the United States look for as part of their teacher evaluation criteria (Danielson 2015). Core reflection can also be

viewed as a highly accessible form of self-initiated professional development (Johnson et al., 2019). All one needs is a basic understanding of the ideas of core reflection and how to engage with it in the moment, and their teaching can begin to reflect this practice with numerous positive results.

Core reflection focuses on teachers' and students' core qualities (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2012). Core qualities are the most basic and unique characteristics that define your being, i.e., positive, open-minded, vulnerable, nurturing, strong, level-headed, passionate, etc. This reflective practice culminates in various psychological methodologies, including positive psychology, the onion model, Gestalt, etc. Developed by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005), core reflection aims to reach people in all areas of education: teachers, students, parents, and administrators (Evelein & Korthagen, 2014).

Positioning core reflection among other reflective practices can help one understand the foundation on which core reflection was developed.

Reflection—in an educational context—is defined and used in many ways, including reflection on prior knowledge to apply to future experiences (reflection as planning), reflecting in the moment, and reflecting post-action (Dewey, 1933). Dewey (1933), a proponent of academic reflection, believed that reflection should be a deliberate and active process of thinking to learn rather than just a passive recall of events. Dewey's innovative writings on reflection in education laid the foundation for reflective researchers who followed.

Schön (1984) discussed reflection in regard to teaching and identified two different types of reflection: reflection on action and reflection in action. Reflection on action refers to a post-teaching thought process, which assesses

and evaluates the positives and negatives of a teaching event. Reflection in action is the process of “thinking on your feet” during a teaching episode, interaction, or musical performance. Schön’s ideas of reflection remain actively referenced in education scholarship and provide a foundation for understanding the use of reflective practices in education today.

In current educational settings, various ideas surrounding reflection exist. Reflection in teaching and learning can be: 1) a way to construct meaningful identity and personal beliefs (Conkling, 2003); 2) a retelling of stories related to teaching and learning to explore narratives and take advantage of teachable moments (Blair, 2012); or 3) a self-critique tool, methodically used to aid goal-setting, assessing, and learning from mistakes (Bartolome, 2013). The latter is perhaps the most prevalent in education and occurs in all school levels, from kindergarten to university. These differing ideas can confuse students when educators neglect to clarify their specific use of the word or practices (Beveren et al., 2018). In more recent literature, Palmer (2017) drew on Dewey’s (1986) “thinking to learn” concept of reflection and offered a new view of reflection. Palmer (2017) suggested that reflection be a way for teachers to relate to their students, shape the classroom environment and instructional materials around the needs and strengths of students, and identify students’ unique strengths and characteristics.

One of the strengths of core reflection is its ability to be practiced in the moment, as opposed to most other forms of reflection found in today’s education, which are usually administered/required by an outside entity and employed after the fact (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). How many of us in our teacher education program heard, “Write a reflection on the lesson

you taught and discuss ways it could have gone better”? This directive, uttered by many teacher educators, is wrought with complications. Preservice teachers often struggle with remembering the lesson or find themselves only focusing on the negative events that transpired while not taking responsibility for the outcome of the lesson. I believe that, instead, if teachers and preservice teachers were to use core reflection, it would not only provide a step-by-step process for reflecting during instruction but also yield a stronger potential for conflict resolution and reflective writing.

So, how do you use core reflection? First, you must learn and practice identifying core qualities in yourself and others. This is much easier than you would expect because of the nature of core qualities. Think to yourself for a moment and answer these questions either in your head or on a sheet of paper:

- 1) What motivates you to work as an educator?
- 2) What about your personality draws out the best in others?
- 3) How do you draw the best out of yourself?

Can you identify your core qualities as a teacher from your answers to these questions? Some common examples of core qualities that teachers embody include love, vulnerability, determination, humor, empathy, and creativity. Do you identify with any of these based on your answers to the above questions?

Identifying one’s core qualities can be uncomfortable, as it can feel like you are giving yourself too much credit or being boastful. Still, in

core reflection, one must be connected to one's positive qualities in order to learn to draw upon them in times of conflict. In 2014, I took a level 1 core reflection workshop with Korthagen at a Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference. One of the most powerful things he told the class was this: "You were born in possession of all the core qualities; some of them may have just fallen out of practice." No truer words were ever spoken. If you think about a baby, they seem so perfect and innocent because they possess all of the core qualities. As humans mature, our characters are shaped in ways that utilize some qualities more than others, but that does not mean the unused qualities are lost forever. They just need practice.

Once you have a firm grasp of how to identify your own core qualities, you can begin focusing on the core qualities of others. It can be fairly easy to identify these qualities in people you know well, like family members, best friends, and colleagues, but part of using core reflection in education is identifying your students' core qualities. Intuitively, you become aware of your student's core qualities in the first few classes, giving you the tools and knowledge to make meaningful connections with them. This is particularly important because having a strong teacher-student connection yields a greater potential for learning (Renyi, 1996). I try to identify my student's core qualities in the first week of classes and document them in a notebook or online spreadsheet. Sometimes I am entirely accurate; other times, I have to amend the list as I get to know them, but the qualities are there, and I have identified them.

In 2016, I completed a core reflection study with two of my high school classes in which I introduced them to the process of core reflection and taught them to identify core qualities in themselves and others. Throughout the academic

year, we practiced naming the qualities of other students in the room and other teachers in the building. As the year progressed, I watched the students react to conflict with their peers and teachers more thoughtfully, identifying the core qualities of the people with whom they were in conflict in an attempt to "humanize" them. Students began to request core reflection practice during stressful times or during exam weeks. I was impressed with the level of maturity they brought to the classroom with the increased use of core reflection. In addition, the support and respect they exhibited toward their peers and teachers were astounding, and I began to truly see the side effects of practicing core reflection with students. At the end of the year, I interviewed willing students about their perception of core reflection and how they believed it could benefit students and teachers. Here are some reflections that they shared with me:

"I think core reflection means to me the positive qualities that you have that you try to bring out even when it's not easy to."

"[Core reflection] is looking inside of yourself to see how you can change your reactions to a situation instead of just getting upset at the situation that's unfolding around you."

"I think the most helpful thing [about core reflection] is self-focus because a lot of people just complain, and they don't think about how they, themselves, fit into the equation. And it's good to step back and realize, yes, I am a part of this, and I also affect this."

"I think teachers and students have a much more profound effect on each other than we think, and if just a few people started doing [core reflection] and being more positive and more open, I think it

would have a large effect on the rest of the community.”

“When going into college or a new job setting, you are going to meet a lot of different people and be exposed to a lot of stressful situations. I think it’s helpful to see the positives in those.”

While small, this study reveals the power of using core reflection in an educational setting and practicing positive thinking with students.

Once you have learned and are comfortable identifying and naming core qualities, the next aspect of core reflection that I have found to be beneficial for educators is understanding the elevator levels (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2012). These outline a step-by-step process for reflecting and responding in the moment when things in your classroom are not progressing as you anticipated. Remember the scenario from the beginning of this paper? What if Mrs. Morris had a three-step process for assessing her thoughts, feelings, and wants before responding to her difficult classroom situation? Would it have turned out differently?

The elevator levels are a visual representation of the three-step process that can help you identify your thoughts, feelings, or wants in the moment. Your head (thoughts), heart (feelings), and stomach (wants) are the visual representations of the three levels. When you find yourself in a sticky situation or conflict during instruction where you struggle with how to react/respond to what is happening in your classroom, this process begins with the mindful decision to pause and reflect. Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What am I thinking? (Visualize your head, and place your hand on top of your head if it helps)
- 2) What am I feeling? (Visualize your heart)
- 3) What do I want? (Another way to phrase this is, “How do I want this situation to resolve/conclude?”)

Be sure to leave judgment out of this process. Teachers have a tendency to be highly self-critical, and some even go so far as to place negative judgment on their feelings. For example, “You should not be feeling angry; that makes you a bad teacher” or “Gosh, why do you feel like crying, pull it together; you are so unprofessional!” These thoughts or limiting beliefs about your self-worth are discouraging and negative. Feelings are there for us to feel, and they are not wrong or bad. It is our reactions to these emotions which can have a negative impact on ourselves or the people around us.

Once you identify your emotions as products of your thoughts, feelings, or wants/desires, you can ask yourself, “What is my ideal?” An ideal is your yearning or desired outcome (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2012). When you created your lesson plan for the day, your learning objective was your ideal. However, teachers can’t always predict when and if their lesson plans will be derailed or fall apart. This creates a situation like the one at the beginning of this article. When asking yourself, “What is my ideal?” you are consciously amending your lesson objectives into something attainable in the moment. With a level head, you have identified how you want your lesson to proceed without reacting emotionally or giving up entirely

on what was undoubtedly a well-intentioned lesson plan.

After identifying your ideal for the situation, you can proceed in this process by walking through the elevator levels, only this time determining what you would think, feel, and want should your new ideal become real. Then, point out the positive core qualities that you possess as a teacher and that you can employ in this moment to help you reach your ideal. This action is similar to connection practice when you engage empathetically with a person you have a conflict with and actively engage with what you believe they are feeling in the moment of conflict (Johnson, 2015). In this situation, however, you are engaging empathetically with your environment, thus triggering a positive connection with your less-than-ideal setting. You can then proceed with your lesson, using your new ideal as a guide and amending the lesson to reach the new goals.

Using core reflection in the classroom offers a variety of benefits, the most powerful being its ability to help process emotions and rationalize classroom conflicts. Educators who engage positively with their core qualities and approach their environment with an open heart and level head can accomplish much more than one who is consistently judgmental and impulsive.

Read about how Mrs. Morris's situation could have ended differently if she had used core reflection and the elevator levels in her time of conflict.

Mrs. Morris stood in front of her middle school math class dumbfounded. She could not understand how a lesson she had spent so much time preparing could go so terribly wrong. The students didn't seem to know how to solve any of

the problems or even how to approach them. She paused, took a breath, and consciously decided to use the elevator levels. She asked herself, "What am I thinking?" and responded, "I think I am a bad teacher." Moving on to the next question, "What am I feeling?" she identified her feelings as "upset, frustrated, tired, stressed, and scared". With the third elevator level, "What do I want?" she identified that she wanted her students to review and understand the last lesson's concept rather than move on with something that would confuse them even more. She identified the thoughts, feelings, and wants should her ideal become real and which of the many core qualities she could employ in the moment to make this happen.

"Thoughts: I would be glad we spent more time on a concept the students were confused about. Next lesson, we can move on. Feelings: I would feel relaxed and pleased with myself and them. Wants: I would want to make time to review this briefly before the next lesson to ensure they remember everything before moving on".

Before proceeding with the lesson, she decided to check in with her students. "How are you all feeling about this lesson so far?" A few students raised their hands, admitting that they were confused, and asked for clarification on the previous day's lesson. She acknowledged their feelings, and before proceeding with the lesson, she asked for feedback and thoughts from her students. Slowly, she watched as students demonstrated vulnerability in sharing with her. She admitted to her students that she was frustrated, but now that they had connected, she felt more at ease. She opened her computer, brought up her last lesson's presentation, and began reviewing the concepts that she believed had confused the students and created issues with today's lesson plan. She tried to explain everything

more than once and in different ways to reach all the students and all the learning styles in her classroom. She no longer felt upset or angry but instead engaged and positive, using her intuition to connect her core qualities with the core qualities of her students. Her students seemed relaxed and attentive and did not hesitate to seek clarification or offer feedback during the remainder of the lesson. When the class was over, she stood by the door, thanking each student for their honesty during the class. Then, she sat down at her desk and wrote a few brief notes about what she had learned and where the class had left off in their understanding of the concepts before closing her computer and going to lunch.

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