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## Reflection as a Basic Category of a Teacher's Thinking and Action

(pp. 229–250)

### Abstract

Reflection in the work of a teacher is an important issue from the perspectives of linking educational theory and practice, a teacher's personal and professional development and solving educational problems in multiple contexts. The world besets the modern teacher with new challenges, and (self-)reflection becomes a necessity as well as a difficult intellectual task. This paper focusses on the issue of a teacher's reflection from the standpoint of linking educational theory and practice and examining the value of their work. Using numerous foreign and Polish publications on the subject, while also referring to classic authors such as Dewey and Schön, the authors analyse the essence of a teacher's reflection in order to highlight the significance of reflective thinking as a key competence for teachers and educators. In the deliberations in this paper, reflection is the foundation of a teacher's reflexivity in modern education, and a priority in preparing individuals for the profession. The method of a systematic and critical selected literature review was used. Special attention was paid to reflective thinking as well

as the flexibility of educational processes and communicative interaction with educational entities.

*Keywords:* reflection, teacher, educational theory and practice, self-evaluation, examination of the value of a teacher's work

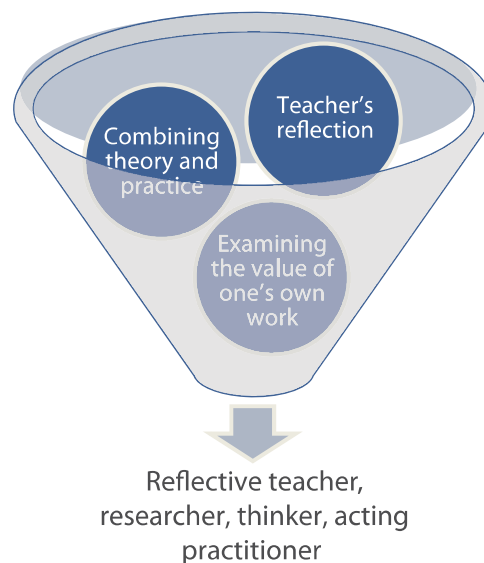
The topic of reflection in the work of a teacher has been present for several decades as an important issue in terms of linking educational theory and practice, the personal and professional development of teachers or as a tool for solving educational problems embedded in various contexts (economic, philosophical, sociological, psychological, pedagogical, etc.). The world is placing ever newer challenges before the modern teacher, and (self-)reflection in the context of (self-)evaluation is becoming a necessity as well as a difficult intellectual task. The post-modern man

experiences an unprecedented hurry caused by the dynamic development of new technologies, which change his previous daily life, change his life orientation, in which there is no room for reflection on the meaning of his life and being. (Tchorzewski, 2016, p. 177)

The purpose of this paper is to familiarise the reader with the issue of a teacher's reflection from the standpoint of linking educational theory and practice and examining the value of their work. The method of systematic and critical literature review (Gonzo, 1972; Ciczkowski, 2000; Creswell, 2013) was used, consisting in a survey of the existing research which adopted a theoretical and practical perspective and demonstrated the scientific usefulness of selected issues related to reflection in the work of the teacher and the determination of potential research fields. The work was facilitated by the question posed by David M. Kaufman (2003): How many times as teachers have we been confronted with situations where we were not really sure what to do? It would therefore be useful to be able to refer to a set of guiding principles based on evidence or at least on long-term successful experience (Kaufman, 2003). What we have in

mind is the three pillars of deliberations on a reflective teacher in the context of their development: the teacher's reflection, linking theory and practice and studying the value of their own work. In this paper, we look at the problem of reflection in more detail.

**Figure 1. The model of a reflective teacher**



Although the occurrence of reflection can be dated back to periods as early as Antiquity, what I have in mind is mainly the work of Socrates (as cited in Ixer, 1999, p. 515), who was the first to consciously begin to use inductive evidence characterised by the use of reasoning, which leads to progressive components and generalised conclusions by means of observations and experiments (for more, see Sobol, 2002, p. 470). In the initial phase of education, this resulted in students' independent search for truth by asking questions (thus, reflection here is associated with the development of questioning thinking and the democratisation of education), which – in the opinion of Andrei Harbartski (2018, p. 150) – in modern pedagogical anthropology is one of the main tasks of education. John Dewey should be mentioned here as well, being one of the first educational theorists and reformers of the early 20th century, and arguing in support of the value of reflection in education. John Dewey's book *How We Think* presents in detail a certain model of reflection that was used as

a basis for understanding the later Popperian development of problem knowledge (Ixer, 1999, p. 515; Valli, 1997). It was then used in so-called problem teaching, which is a specific educational method consisting in the student independently solving (under the guidance of the teacher, of course, as a facilitator) theoretical or practical problems, understood as educational issues. Dewey became the forerunner of learning by doing, in which reflection, questioning and dialogical thinking develop.<sup>1</sup> According to Dewey's theory (as cited in Pérez-Ibáñez, 2018, p. 21), we only learn through positive experiences<sup>2</sup> by reflecting on them, because only conscious reflection allows us to give meaning to such experiences. If teachers do not require students to reflect on meaning, then they are engaged in training (in a behavioural context), not education (in an interpretive context). It is believed that reflection fills the void caused by the abandonment of positivist paradigms (Killen & Todnem, 1991; Crandall, 1993; Ixer, 1999). John Dewey, America's greatest philosopher of education and

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy E. Taylor and Linda Valli (1992, p. 34) deliberate on the quality of thinking that students engage in (when they reflect on their learning). According to them, the goal of teacher training programmes should be to develop relativism in teachers' thinking in order to develop the ability to look at things (problems, processes and teaching) from several points of view (in Poland, we call this *triangulation*) instead of accepting the absolutism associated with the only perspective, whether right or wrong, because relativism leads to critical thinking and action and may be a more advanced way of thinking than dualism. Thus, reflective teachers are interested in opposing viewpoints, treating them kindly and with due respect, because they can recognise them from the perspective of their own weaknesses; hence the need for reflection in examining the value of their own work.

<sup>2</sup> School is a place where it is most difficult to have a real positive experience, due to its isolation from the real world. Bogusław Śliwerski and Michał Paluch (2021) argue that students associate schools with boredom, wasted time, a sense of meaninglessness, promoted conformity and opportunism and compulsoriness. Thus, since the times of Dewey, scholars have opined that the Polish education system is associated with the reality of 'appearances' or 'illusions', as well as 'perpetrators and victims'. However, in the context of developing reflection, the worst is the everyday didactic and educational practice that consists in blocking students' independent thinking, schematisation of action and transmission of knowledge. Therefore, Dewey described it well as a detachment from reality and an inability to acquire real, positive experiences in learning and reflection.

an early proponent of reflective learning and teaching, dedicated his life to the idea of overcoming the dualism that separates the field of education from the rest of the modern world: thought and action, study and practice, educational theory and practice, science and communication, and academic life and everyday life. The central turning point of these dualisms embodied in Dewey's progressivism, as opposed to the epistemological individualism and certainty, was his inquiry theory.<sup>3</sup> Inquiry, according to Dewey, combines mental reasoning and action. His theory of inquiry rejects both the 'autonomy of thought' advocated by mentalists and the image of 'knowledge' that was so close to the ancient Greek philosophers, who placed theory above practical skills and wisdom in everyday matters (Schön, 1992, p. 121). Dewey contrasts reflective thinking with habits of thought that are unsystematic, lack evidence, are based on false beliefs or assumptions or mindlessly conform to tradition and authority (Valli, 1997, p. 68). He further claims that problem-based learning, for the reflective practitioner, is the main basis for reflection. The second stage of Dewey's model is the observation of the experienced problem, where the main role in this process is played by experience (as cited in Howard, 2003, p. 197). Dewey considered reflective practice to be an intentional, systematic and disciplined examination of the value of a teacher's work, which is ultimately expected to lead to positive changes in a teacher's professional development (reflection on action). Later, Donald Schön (1987) added a variant of reflection in which a practising teacher can reflect on their intuitive knowledge in the course of action (reflection in action) (Ghanizadeh, 2017; Munby, 1989; Schön, 1984). However, there are authors with different views on the value of Schön's reflection in action, namely Roth, Lawless and Masciot (as cited in Beck & Kosnik, 2001, p. 218). They claim that his concept is of little importance to the understanding of teaching processes, and instead recommend organising an experiential space in which teachers work continuously to expand their experiences. Educational practice shows that teachers work with time constraints and rarely enjoy the luxury of time for reflection. With this concept, they become

<sup>3</sup> Implicitly, we can say that this is the theory of truth inquiry.

researchers and self-evaluators (cf. Kołodziejcki, 2012). The teaching and learning processes are based on elements of quantification and observation, with the objective of constantly examining what one knows and whether one is getting it right (Carlo et al., 2010, p. 60).

For many years, professional reflection and reflexivity of teachers have been the subject of pedagogical research and analysis in Poland (e.g. Dylak, 1996; Gołębniak, 1998; Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1997, 2006; Pollard, 1998; Day, 2004; Kwiatkowska, 2008; Klus-Stańska, 2006a, 2008; Muchacka et al., 2013; Czaja-Chudyba, 2013; Czaja-Chudyba & Muchacka, 2016; Michalak, 2010; Gołębniak & Zamorska, 2014; Szymczak, 2015, 2017; Dróżka & Madalińska-Michalak, 2016; Szymańska, 2020, 2021; Kołodziejcki, 2014, 2016; Perkowska-Klejman, 2019; Chrost, 2017, 2021; Szymczak, 2015) and abroad (Habermas, 1973; Schön, 1983, 1987; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Bulman, 1994; Yelloly & Henkel, 1995; Calderhead, 1989; Yip, 2006).

It seems that modern education still attaches more importance to teaching and focusses less on upbringing and self-education (cf. Chrost, 2017, p. 132).<sup>4</sup> One may also wonder whether in a teacher's reflective and self-evaluative practice we focus too much on technical reflection, which, according to Dawn Del Carlo, Holly Hinkhouse and Leah Isbell (2010, p. 59), is similar to the behavioural approach (instrumental reflection), and we overlook (or separate too much) reflection on the teacher themselves, as a person who functions directly in the cognitive, emotional/social, volitional and physical areas. What is reflection? This word comes from Latin (*reflectere*) and means 'to lean back' (Valli, 1997, p. 67). Reflection prompts one to think about a specific problem area by analysing one's own experiences from a temporal perspective, resulting in better self-knowledge and thus an opportunity to improve one's working methods, which in turn leads to higher efficiency in the educational process (Marciniak, 2014, p. 169) as well as to improved well-being of the teacher, which, after all, can be considered a normative state and a condition for professional development, in addition to effects in educational practice.

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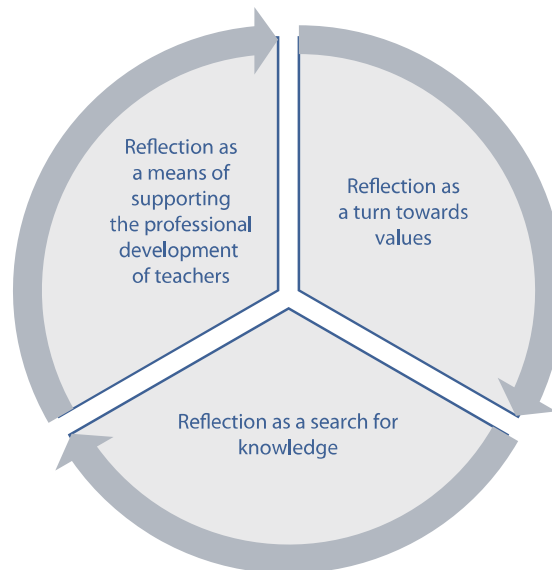
<sup>4</sup> However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, attempts were made to reverse these proportions.

A reflective person is someone who returns in their thoughts to what they have seen and heard, one who contemplates and is a thinker. In this regard, as Linda Valli (1997) writes, reflection should not be confused with a reflex, which is an involuntary action or instinctive reaction. Although reflection can be spontaneous and thus has aspects of intuition, it should also be associated with a conscious, systematic way of thinking (Valli, 1997). A reflective person carefully considers important issues and is characterised by openness to the opinions and advice of others. Thus, the reflective action considered here (teaching, upbringing, education and self-creation) is a process characterised by careful backward-orientated judgement. Through reflective thinking, a person formulates a reflection and acquires the capacity for reflectiveness, which is defined as 'the tendency to reflect, to ponder, to consider, and to analyse' (Szymczak, 1981, p. 32). In pedagogical terms, according to Teresa Hejnicka-Bezwińska (2008), reflectivity is 'the ability to analyse acquired experiences and incorporate new data, information and knowledge into the cognitive structures one has and to create new connections between knowledge and action' (p. 502). The very ability to make reflections becomes important. It should be stated that reflectivity is a mental competence, the ability of a person to be both an object and a subject of cognition. It is a kind of internal dialogue that manifests in the person's actions. Sławomir Krzychała (2005, pp. 144–145), inspired by the analyses of Beck (2002) and Giddens (2001), differentiates between the characteristics of *reflectivity* and *reflectiveness*. He defines the latter as critical thought, self-reference, self-reflection and self-interpretation. He also specifies that the term *reflective* encompasses both a cognitive process and a social practice, and thus describes several types of reflectivity.

So, should reflectivity (reflection) in education be a core category of thought and action for a teacher combining theory and practice in examining the value of their own work? This very question provokes reflection, does it not? After all, reflection is a deeper thinking about something, pondering over something, a consideration combined with an analysis, often triggered by an intense experience which we associate strongly with our internal motivation (Sobol, 2002, p. 945; PWN, n.d.).

In this sense, reflection means the thinking subject (a teacher, in this case) turning to their own activity when they realise an action. Reflection is also a thought or a statement (oral or written) resulting from such a thought. In this sense, reflection is a means of supporting the professional development of teachers (Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003, p. 248), and professional development involves reflection on how to teach so that teaching has value, that is, how to teach effectively. According to Dewey, people wonder in order to know (as cited in LaBoskey, 1993, p. 10). This can contribute to the building of a culture of reflectivity in education within the framework of teachers' personal and professional responsibility (Korporowicz, 2010, p. 29). This is illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Three forms of reflection**



One can therefore also consider reflection as Tyron C. Howard (2003, pp. 197–198) does, as thinking about one's own experience and educational activities in the context of meanings created and interpreted in order to be able to make more appropriate educational decisions in future. This can thus be treated as thinking and actions leading to an examination of the value of a teacher's decisions, which is present in cognitive processes understood as active and purposeful (Henderson-Hurley & Hurley, 2013). Kam-shing Yip (2006, p. 778) further argues that reflective practice is



a process of self-engagement and a kind of self-reflection. Systematic diagnosis, analysis, interpretation, inference and reflection on one's own actions and in action definitely improve the quality of daily educational work and make a teacher a kind of reflective practitioner and researcher who turns to reflection.

As Anna Perkowska-Klejman (2018, pp. 8–9) points out, the popularisers of reflectivity in learning and teaching included Kenneth Zeichner and Daniel Liston (1996), who identified five types of reflection that could be applied by teachers:

- rapid reflection – immediate and appearing automatically,
- repair reflection – the teacher decides to change their actions in response to signals received from other educational participants,
- review reflection – the teacher discusses and evaluates a selected aspect of their own practice,
- research reflection – a teacher gathers data and research in a field that interests them, and applies the findings to their educational practice and
- retheorising and reformulating reflection – a process during which a teacher critically analyses their own practice and their personal theories in light of scientific theories, and decides about possible changes in their own thinking and action.

Reflective learning and teaching in Zeichner and Liston's concept (1996) has five key characteristics: (1) experience and (2) learning by solving practical problems, (3) awareness of personal assumptions and values, (4) paying attention to the situational and cultural context, making changes in and participating in the development of the teaching content and (5) taking responsibility for one's own learning and professional development. Reflectivity in learning and teaching is manifested by questioning the objectives, values, assumptions and context. Reflectivity makes learning democratic (deliberative, dialogical). The roles of students and teachers are only symbolically assumed; everyone is equally important and participates, jointly taking decisions to the same extent (Zeichner

& Liston, 1996, as cited in Perkowska-Klejman, 2018, p. 9). Reflection is a very important construct of a person's self-awareness, and it seems necessary in the case of a mindful teacher.

Reflective thinking is not only about cognitive processes, but also about emotional, social, cultural and political reasoning. Reflective thinking is an indicator of the highest maturity; it develops the so-called personal learning and facilitates adaptive processes. Mezirow's concept (1978, 1991, 1998) of reflective thinking also seems interesting in this context. He describes reflection as a metacognitive skill that can exist on different levels. Mezirow (1991) refers to six levels of thinking, where the first three are non-reflective levels: habitual action, thoughtful action and introspection. *Habitual actions* are done without realisation of this fact and can be done simultaneously with other activities; these are automatic activities, such as typing on a keyboard. *Thoughtful action*, on the other hand, is a cognitive process during which people use knowledge that already exists, but without trying to evaluate it. The starting point for thinking is prior knowledge and the ability to choose different solutions to a specific issue. Thinking in this process is based on theoretical knowledge, which is not subject to (self-)evaluation. In both thoughtful actions and routine actions, the existing systems of knowledge and meanings do not change. *Introspection*, on the other hand, means analysing one's own thoughts, beliefs and mental states. It refers to thinking about oneself in relation to the performance of a task. It is a conscious and ongoing activity. However, it is not an attempt to reconsider previously acquired knowledge or to verify its validity. The subject analyses their thoughts and feelings, but does not reflect on how they developed.

The subsequent levels, which Mezirow identified as reflective thinking, are 1) content reflection, 2) process reflection and 3) theoretical reflection. *Content reflection* refers to what one sees, thinks or feels, and how one acts while performing a task. This activity can take the form of recognising and categorising one's behaviour in order to interpret it. Content reflection is often equated with thoughtful action. This type of activity is based on the subject's previous knowledge and experience. A person with full awareness thinks about what they are doing to solve

real problems. Thinking at this level, however, does not reflect on why specific actions are taken. Nor does one consider how solving a given issue will affect one's development. The basic question within this reflection is: What do I perceive? *Process reflection* involves 'examining' one's perception, thinking and feeling. It involves the categorisation of a task and an attempt to interpret it. At this stage, one focusses on what one feels when faced with a problem and how one deals with those feelings. One also considers how others will perceive one's activity. One is aware that one's actions have a certain impact on oneself. The basic question within this reflection is: How do I perceive? *Theoretical reflection* addresses the question of why one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours cause consequences for one's existing knowledge. One also thinks about the consequences of one's actions in future, in different situations. Theoretical reflection includes an analysis of the entire situation and involves complex problem-solving. The resulting theoretical constructs are incorporated into a deeper understanding of the problem, and may even lead to a reinterpretation of the problem. This involves finding alternative methods of doing things and changes in reasoning. Theoretical reflection involves a high degree of control over one's behaviour, which is achieved by thinking about it.

These categories of non-reflective and reflective activities show the determinants and a certain process that can occur when improving oneself and one's reflectivity. They indicate an increasing level of reflection and therefore arrange themselves into activities of increasing complexity (Perkowska-Klejman, 2012, pp. 215–219). Krzykała (2005, pp. 144–145) analyses situations that are important in terms of a teacher's reflectivity and self-evaluation: 1) extinguished reflectivity – when relationships during adolescence and peer group involvement systematically inhibit and limit the capacity for critical reflection; 2) diffusive reflexivity – when there is a need to stay and organise life, such as in conflict situations; 3) taken-over reflectivity – when the orientation is taken over from ready-made patterns and norms; 4) actionist reflectivity – which is associated with experimentation and innovation; 5) situational reflectivity – based on the use of situational opportunities, without forward planning of the future;

6) strategic reflectivity – focussed on forward-looking plans and goals; and 7) actionist reflectivity – which is expressed in experiencing and re-working the experiences of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

According to Afsaneh Ghanizadeh (2017, p. 104), previous research based on the work of Dewey and Schön was only concerned with the importance of reflection in relation to the processes of teaching and learning; consequently, we also selectively focus herein on the development of the reflective teacher in the context of examining the value of their work. For Dewey, thought is reflective only when it is logically organised and includes consideration of the consequences of decisions. In this sense, reflective thought looks back on assumptions and beliefs to make sure they are grounded in logic and evidence, and looks forward to the implications of a particular course of action. Reflective teachers are critical of the ideas that come to their minds. In their search for evidence, they consider competing claims that help them dispel doubts (Valli, 1997, p. 68). Thus, there is a justified need to link scientific theories with pedagogical (educational) practice – not so much in the philosophical (epistemological) context, but in the practical (rational) and developmental contexts. Nancy Taylor and Linda Valli (1999) encourage academic teachers to develop reflection in students of education by dividing reflection into psychological and sociological types. In the former approach, research has shown that students' ability to reflect is also a product of the educational experience in the temporal dimension, and that more critical reflection can be developed through careful selection of teaching strategies, preferably those that teach reflection as a holistic construct found, for example, in communication and dialogicity. This results from the simple fact that knowledge is socially constructed, modelled through reflection and supported by practice and experience. What is helpful here are student reports, which are an invaluable source of qualitative data. Also, research projects that use the research in action method with

<sup>5</sup> The development of reflectivity in a teacher, however, cannot be taken for granted. Bożena Muchacka (2018) points to a number of barriers that limit this process, such as subjective limitations on cognitive competence, emotional and motivational barriers and external barriers.

contextual thinking are useful. This research has shown that although students' conceptual levels may not change in a revolutionary manner during their studies, well-structured experiences can increase the teacher candidates' level of reflection. Acting in tandem (teacher and students) can enable individuals to think, be attentive, make sense and reach further (LaBoskey, 1993, p. 11). The sociological approach, in turn, concerns the scope and content of students' thinking rather than the quality of reflection. One way of setting the goals of a curriculum that would encourage students to undertake broad reflection on the moral and social aspects of teaching is to use Tom's method (1985; see also Taylor & Valli, 1993, pp. 42–43), which develops various dimensions of questioning thinking and action: (a) the problem area, (b) the model to be used to study a particular problem area and (c) the ontological status of educational phenomena. In the process of (self-)evaluation, a reflective teacher does the following:

- systematically asks themselves questions about their own teaching (in the constructivist model of learning/organisation of the educational environment), and displays an inquisitive, exploratory attitude,
- questions their own knowledge and tests theory in practice,
- examines, using appropriate tools, their own teaching (organisation of the learning process of students and teacher), and acts as a researcher,
- allows other teachers to investigate, e.g. to observe their work, allows for honest discussion of the material and creates positive mutual learning environments,
- studies their place and that of the institution where they work in the local environment, is interested in issues associated with school and teacher emancipation, seeks their place in the environment, and seeks allies and
- continuously learns and improves their qualifications formally and informally, conducts research and strives for development (cf. Day, 2004, p. 46; Kołodziejski, 2016, pp. 365–366).

It is clear, or at least assumed, that self-evaluation (as a reflective examination of the value of a teacher's own work) should be continuous and systematic, because only then does it allow educational goals to be achieved and one's own development to accelerate. With regard to a teacher, it can be assumed that evaluation activities require the following attitudes:

- creative – one that is constructive and edifying,
- self-critical – the ability to critically evaluate oneself and one's actions,
- analytical – the ability to study particular characteristics of an educational phenomenon or process,
- ethical and moral – the ability to respect the norms and customs in force in science and education and
- causal – the ability and skill to perceive oneself as the cause of one's own actions, which in practice is linked to autotelic motivation, which is associated with the selfless pursuit of performing activities with passion, as well as cognitive and emotional curiosity (Kołodziejcki, 2011, pp. 289–290, 2016, pp. 369–370).

Nowadays, reflection is becoming the foundation of task performance in the context of the development of all subjects of education, and it performs many specific functions, such as perceptual, descriptive, exploratory, predictive, heuristic, metacognitive and self-cognitive ones (Chrost, 2021, p. 219; Białecka-Pikul, 2012, pp. 284–285). Reflective thinking is the model of a teacher's transformative lifelong learning, in which learning, as a transformative process, is based on various levels of reflection (Mezirow, 1991, as cited in Perkowska-Klejman, 2012). Reflectivity is associated with the individual's autonomy and self-control; it is a source of creative action, innovation and steadfastness in the search for and creation of various concepts, and then in their practical implementation (Gołębniak, 1998). The formulation of reflections enables a kind of emancipation from the routine and a sense of being oneself that is constructed and stored in one's consciousness. A reflective subject is convinced of their own personal individuality, rationality, uniqueness and freedom.

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Reflection is a kind of intellectual inner power 'that largely determines the mental and moral, as well as technical and practical level of a person' (Chudy, 2006, p. 72). In the context of the other two pillars of this paper's considerations on a reflective teacher, namely the combination of theory and practice and the study of the value of one's own work, a teacher's reflection appears – due to the dynamics of social change – to be the fundamental pillar. Therefore, in the education of future teachers capable of formulating deep reflection that covers the value system, experience and reliable knowledge – teachers who are researchers – the area of reflective thinking plays a fundamental role in making educational processes more flexible and enhancing communicative interaction with educational entities.

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