

## THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF EARLY-CAREER TEACHERS AND THE PROMOTION OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

**Mariana TIPEI-VOIA, Ph.D. Cnd.,**  
Babeş Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca,  
[mcismasiuisj@yahoo.com](mailto:mcismasiuisj@yahoo.com)

**Alina Felicia ROMAN, Prof. Habil. Ph.D.,**  
Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad  
[romanalinafelicia@yahoo.com](mailto:romanalinafelicia@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *This study explores the fundamental theoretical frameworks of reflective practice in professional development, based on the premise that the professional debut of teachers continues to be described in the specialized literature as a critical stage for the formation of professional identity and the maturation of teaching competences. The article offers a critical and integrative analysis of both international and Romanian literature, examining the evolution of the concept of professional reflection from classical models (Dewey; Van Manen; Schön) to contemporary frameworks focused on identity, emotional and digital integration, reflective mentoring, and collaborative learning (Korthagen; Akkerman & Meijer; Redecker & Punie). Beyond the theoretical synthesis, the study includes an exploratory qualitative analysis conducted through a semi-structured interview survey addressed to novice teachers, aiming to capture how they understand and practice reflection, as well as the barriers and facilitators of its implementation in concrete school contexts. The results converge toward interpreting reflection as a contextual, dialogical, axiological, and technologically mediated phenomenon that combines cognitive, affective, and ethical dimensions of teaching practice and calls for systemically oriented initial and continuous training policies.*

**Keywords:** *reflective practice; novice teachers; qualitative analysis; interview; mentoring; professional identity; educational digitalization; professional development.*

## Introduction

The beginning of a teaching career is recognized as a period with a high degree of professional and emotional vulnerability, often marked by what Veenman (1984) called the “reality shock”: the gap between theoretical preparation and the practical complexity of teaching. Recent literature confirms the persistence of this challenge and highlights the critical role of professional support, reflexivity, and mentoring in reducing the risk of burnout and attrition (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kyriacou, 2022).

In the European and Romanian context, the need to develop a reflective culture became more acute during and after the pandemic, alongside the pressure to integrate educational technologies (Redecker & Punie, 2017; Istrate & Neculau, 2021). Professional reflexivity thus emerges as a central competence, necessary not only for didactic adaptation but also for maintaining psychosocial well-being and fostering an ethical and responsible educational practice (Cucoş, 2020).

## The Evolution of the Concept of Reflective Practice

The formative models of reflection originate in the works of Dewey (1933), who described reflection as a deliberative process oriented toward problem-solving. Later, Van Manen (1977) introduced the distinction between the technical, practical, and critical levels of reflection, offering a hierarchical framework for professional maturation. Schön (1983) complemented these approaches with the idea of reflection integrated into action, describing the professional’s ability to adjust strategies in real time.

Contemporary literature expands these models by including identity-related, emotional, digital, and social dimensions. Korthagen (2017) proposed an ecological perspective, viewing reflection as a mechanism for harmonizing environment, competences, beliefs, and identity. Akkerman and Meijer (2019) highlighted the dialogical nature of teaching identity, emphasizing the role of collective reflection. In parallel, the European DigCompEdu frameworks (Redecker & Punie, 2017) include reflection as an essential part of digital educational competences.

Romanian research (Cucoş, 2020; Iucu & Pânişoară, 2019; Albulescu & Catalano, 2021; Istrate & Neculau, 2021) confirms the need to integrate reflection into both initial and continuous teacher training, emphasizing its ethical dimension and the role of reflective mentoring in Romanian schools.

To understand the depth of the concept, it is useful to differentiate between levels of reflection as developed by theorists. The model

proposed by Schön (1983) contrasts two types of professional reflection:

Mode of Reflection	Focus	When It happens
Reflection-in-Action	Real-time adjustment; modifying actions while an activity is in progress.	During the activity.
Reflection-on-Action	Retrospective analysis; learning from and evaluating a past event.	After the activity.

Tab.1. *Characteristics of Reflection Models*

Donald Schön's concept of Reflection-in-Action is a central component of his seminal work "The Reflective Practitioner" (1983). It describes the ability of skilled professionals to think, adapt, and learn while performing a task.

Reflection-in-Action is the process of "thinking on your feet" or "knowing-in-action." It is the ability to recognize something unexpected or problematic in a situation, analyze it, and make an immediate adjustment to one's actions without consciously interrupting the flow of activity. This process is often intuitive and specific to experienced professionals.

Characteristic	Description
Timing	Occurs during the action or event.
Process	A real-time, intuitive, and improvisational response to immediate feedback.
Learning outcome	The practitioner draws on their tacit knowledge (unarticulated, experience-based understanding) to reframe the problem and adjust their <i>doing</i> .
Purpose	To maintain effective performance, solve an unforeseen problem immediately, and keep the action moving forward.

Tab.2. *Key Characteristics of Reflection-in-Action*

Reflection-on-Action is the retrospective component of Donald Schön's (1983) model of reflective practice. It involves taking a critical look at an experience, event, or action after it has occurred, allowing the professional to learn from it and inform future practice.

Characteristic	Description
Timing	Occurs after the action is complete (retrospective).
Process	Systematic analysis of an event, often involving journaling, discussion with peers, or structured debriefing.
Learning outcome	Leads to the conscious development of new knowledge, revised strategies, or changes to one's theory-in-use.
Purpose	To understand <i>why</i> things happened as they did, to identify the underlying assumptions and knowledge-in-action that guided the performance, and to formulate lessons for the future.

Tab.3. *Key Characteristics of Reflection-on-Action*

Reflection-on-Action is crucial because it transforms raw experience into practical professional knowledge. It is the process through which the professional moves from mere action (knowing-in-action) to a conscious understanding of what they know and how they apply that knowledge. While Reflection-in-Action refers to immediate and intuitive adjustments made during performance, Reflection-on-Action involves deliberate and structured thinking carried out afterward.

### **Mentoring Strategies Centered on Reflection**

The mentor should not simply provide solutions but rather guide the novice teacher (the mentee) to find their own solutions through self-analysis. Mentoring strategies include:

- Cognitive Coaching – Bringing to light the thinking behind the action (*reflection-in-action*). The mentor uses open-ended questions to explore the mentee's mental processes (e.g., "What made you change your plan at that moment?").
- Structured Debriefing Meetings – Transforming concrete experience into formal knowledge. A reflective cycle is used (e.g., Korthagen's ALACT Model: *Action* → *Looking back on the action* → *Awareness of essential aspects* → *Creating alternatives* → *Testing the new action*).
- Shared Reflection Journal – Creating a non-formal and confidential communication space. The mentor comments in writing on the mentee's observations, offering alternative perspectives or relevant resources and encouraging honest self-disclosure.
- Communities of Practice (CoP) for Novice Teachers – Socializing problems and solutions. Novice teachers analyze critical cases from their own practice in groups. Collective

reflection reduces the sense of isolation and validates challenges (Rad, Vișcu, Cădăriu & Watkins Jr., 2025).

### **Methodology**

The study investigates the professional development needs and reflective practices of novice teachers, aiming to identify the specific challenges of early teaching careers, mechanisms of professional regulation, and the role of mentoring in developing reflective thinking. The research aligns with the qualitative–constructivist paradigm, focusing on understanding the subjective meanings attributed to professional experiences and reflective learning processes in real teaching contexts.

### **Objectives and Design**

The research was conceived as an exploratory qualitative study, with the main objective of analyzing how early-career teachers perceive and apply reflection on their own practice, as well as identifying their professional support needs. Since the purpose of the study is comprehensive rather than predictive, the chosen method allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences—not for statistical generalization but to generate transferable insights for teacher training and professional development.

### **Method and Research Instrument**

The method used was a qualitative survey based on semi-structured interviews, designed to capture the representations, experiences, and reflective strategies of novice teachers (Bocoș, Stan & Crișan, 2021). The research instrument — the interview guide titled “*Professional Development Needs and Reflective Practice among Novice Teachers*” — was developed from Schön’s (1983) theoretical framework of professional reflection, complemented by more recent perspectives on reflective mentoring (Korthagen, 2001; Loughran, 2010).

The interview contained seven thematic questions, progressively structured from the descriptive dimension of experience to the interpretive and critical levels of reflection:

1. Initial challenges in teaching activity;
2. Professional development priorities;
3. Awareness of reflective practice;
4. Situations of reflection-in-action;
5. Institutional support and mentoring;
6. Transition to critical reflection;
7. Medium-term professional development projections.

The questions were open-ended, encouraging narrative expression and free articulation of perceptions. The interviewer used clarification, reformulation, and probing techniques specific to semi-structured interviews.

### **Sample and Procedure**

The research sample consisted of 24 novice teachers from both urban and rural schools, with professional experience ranging from 6 months to 3 years. Participant selection was purposive, considering diversity in school contexts and access to institutional mentoring. The interviews were conducted individually, either face-to-face or online, with an average duration of 30–40 minutes. All participants signed informed consent forms, and their identities were protected through anonymous coding.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Data interpretation was carried out using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive coding (based on emerging responses) and deductive coding (derived from theoretical frameworks of professional reflection). The analysis followed four successive stages:

1. Familiarization with the material – full transcription of interviews and repeated reading to highlight significant ideas.
2. Initial coding – identifying recurrent meaning units (e.g., “uncertainty in classroom management,” “need for constructive feedback,” “spontaneous adaptation to unexpected situations”).
3. Theme formation – grouping codes into broader conceptual themes capturing cognitive, emotional, and organizational processes involved in professional development.
4. Integrative interpretation – correlating the extracted themes with the literature to explain how reflection contributes to professional competence and resilience.

### **Results of the Qualitative Analysis**

The analysis of the responses revealed four major thematic axes:

- Managing uncertainty and student behavior – Most novices reported difficulties in maintaining discipline and attention, identifying this as their main source of stress. Reflection was used primarily retrospectively (“what could I have done differently”), confirming the predominance of reflection-on-action.
- Need for applied training and active mentoring – Responses showed a gap between theoretical preparation and the concrete

realities of classrooms. Teachers expressed a desire for personalized mentoring and immediate feedback, favoring learning through mutual observation.

- Emergence of reflection-in-action – A significant number of participants described moments of spontaneous adjustment to teaching strategies, interpreted as early forms of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983).
- Openness to critical reflection – Only some respondents mentioned aspects related to equity, cultural diversity, or the social impact of pedagogical decisions, confirming that the transition from technical to critical reflection is gradual and depends on institutional support and school climate.

The transferability of results relies on the richness and relevance of the descriptions for teachers in similar contexts. Since the research is interpretive, conclusions do not aim for statistical generalization but for generating formative insights and transferable models of reflection for training and mentoring programs.

The findings highlight the complexity of the early career phase in teaching and confirm the importance of reflection as a mechanism for adaptation and experiential learning. Novice teachers described a difficult transition between theoretical preparation and everyday school realities, where theory, however solid, often seems insufficient to handle real classroom situations. In this phase, reflection becomes not only a professional tool but also a form of cognitive and emotional self-support.

A dominant orientation toward retrospective reflection — reflection-on-action was observed, where teachers later analyze problematic moments in their work. However, early signs of reflection-in-action also appeared, manifested through quick, intuitive adjustments during teaching. This evolution indicates that reflective thinking does not develop automatically but gradually, through practice and contextual support.

A significant finding concerns the perception of mentoring. Although novices appreciated the existence of a formal support framework, they felt the lack of genuine formative engagement. Many described mentoring as an administrative rather than pedagogical dialogue process. This underscores the need for reflective mentoring based on conversation, mutual observation, and immediate feedback — elements that can turn teaching experiences into conscious professional learning. Another important dimension is critical reflection. Although less present in responses, it appeared in concerns about equity, diversity, and the teacher's influence on students' perceptions. This emerging

ethical awareness signals professional maturation and suggests the need to explicitly include critical reflection in training programs.

Overall, results show that the reflective development of novice teachers cannot rely solely on individual effort. It must be institutionally supported through a school culture that values analysis, dialogue, and collaborative learning. Only then does reflection become a collective process of knowledge construction rather than a solitary exercise in introspection.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

The study confirmed that reflective practice is a fundamental component of teaching professionalization, especially in the early career stage. Novice teachers need not only theoretical training but also guided reflection spaces, where they can analyze their experiences, challenges, and successes together with mentors and colleagues.

Reflection-on-action dominates the early stage, while reflection-in-action and critical reflection appear sporadically — indicating a real need for systematic training in reflective thinking. In this sense, reflective mentoring and communities of practice emerge as two key priorities for professional development policies.

The study also shows that an organizational culture based on collaborative learning, where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for progress and experiences are discussed openly, fosters the transition from mere adaptation to pedagogical innovation. In such a context, the novice teacher gradually becomes a reflective and autonomous practitioner, capable of building their own professional identity.

For the future, research should expand to a larger sample and include complementary methods such as reflective journal content analysis or direct classroom observation. It would also be relevant to conduct longitudinal evaluations of the impact of reflection on teacher retention and job satisfaction.

In conclusion, the results indicate that reflective training is not optional but a prerequisite for professional resilience and excellence. A teacher who consciously reflects on their own practice becomes not only more effective but also more balanced and engaged — capable of turning early-career challenges into a solid foundation for a long-term teaching career.

### **References**

- Akkerman, S. F., & Meijer, P. C. (2019). *Dialogical reflections in teacher learning*. Springer.
- Albulescu, I., & Catalano, H. (2021). *E-Didactica. Procesul de instruire în mediul online*. București: Editura DPH.



- Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. W. H. Freeman.
- Bocoș, M., Stan, C., & Crișan, C. (2021). Cercetarea educațională. Vol. 1: Coordonate generale ale activităților de cercetare. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Cucoș, C. (2020). Pedagogie: Repere teoretice și aplicative (ediția a III-a). Iași: Polirom.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teaching for deeper learning. Harvard Education Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933). How we think. D. C. Heath and Company.
- European Commission. (2021). Teachers in Europe: Careers, development and well-being. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Ingersoll, R., & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: A critical review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 201–233.
- Istrate, O., & Neculau, B. (2021). Pedagogia digitală. Iași: Polirom.
- Iucu, R., & Pânișoară, I.-O. (2019). Profesionalizarea carierei didactice. Iași: Polirom.
- Korthagen, F. (2017). Inconvenient truths about teacher learning: Towards professional development 3.0. *Teachers and Teaching*, 23(4), 387–405.
- Kyriacou, C. (2022). Managing teacher stress and anxiety. Routledge.
- Rad, D., Vișcu, L.-I., Cădăriu, I.-E., & Watkins Jr., C. (2025). Psychoeducational Challenges in the 21st Century. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Redecker, C., & Punie, Y. (2017). European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu). Publications Office of the European Union.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. Basic Books.
- Veenman, S. (1984). *Perceived problems of beginning teachers. Review of Educational Research*, 54(2), 143–178.