

REFLECTING TO LEAD OR LEADING TO REFLECT: AN INSIGHT INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REFLECTIVE TEACHING AND TEACHER LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT:

While existing research has established the positive impact of teacher leadership on academic performance and school development, the relationship between reflective teaching and teacher leadership remains underexplored; thus, this study sought to bridge this gap by examining how reflective teaching practices influence teacher leadership, offering fresh insights into teachers' evolving roles in leading change, breaking boundaries, and transforming schools and universities. Grounded in UNICEF's Teacher and Education Policy, which advocates teachers' professional growth and empowerment to meet diverse student needs, the study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, with data collected through surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs). Guided by Larrivee's critical reflection framework, correlation and regression analyses revealed a significant relationship between reflective teaching and teacher leadership ($F = 5.165$; $p = 0.025$) at the 0.05 level of significance. Thematic analysis of FGD responses further revealed that teacher leaders commonly viewed themselves as "collaborative, passionate, and selfless," associated reflective teaching with "impact," and identified "heavy workload and vague policies" as key barriers to its practice. Based on these findings, the study presents key implications and recommendations for strengthening teacher leadership in schools and universities, emphasizing the importance of fostering an environment that supports and sustains a strong culture of reflective teaching.

KEYWORDS: Teacher Leadership, Reflective Teaching, Pedagogical Reflection

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, educational institutions have increasingly sought to empower teachers as leaders. Wenner and Campbell (2017) define teacher leadership (TL) as the influence educators exert to drive change and innovation in schools and communities. TL goes beyond teaching, encompassing roles that inspire and improve educational environments. However, many educators have not embraced TL on a personal level (Cosenza 2015; Wenner & Campbell 2017). Studies suggest teachers lack intrinsic motivation to engage in leadership roles (Alegado & Edrada 2018; Araskal & Kilinc 2015) due to a lack of recognition of its value. There is thus a need to cultivate metacognitive awareness and reflective teaching (RT) practices to help educators appreciate and sustain TL ideals. York-Barr and Duke (2004) emphasize that TL enables teachers to influence peers, superiors, and stakeholders to enhance teaching and learning.

RT originates from Dewey's philosophy, which views teaching as a continuous process of reflection based on classroom experiences. Dewey (1938) suggests a five-step problem-solving model: suggesting solutions, questioning, hypothesizing, reasoning, and testing (Dymoke & Harrison 2008). RT involves systematic inquiry into teaching performance, refining teaching through evidence

collection, interpretation, and evaluation (Mathew & Peechattu 2017; Bawaneh et al. 2020). RT fosters TL by encouraging educators to self-regulate and adapt their practices.

However, RT adoption faces challenges, including low motivation, excessive workload, and inadequate training (Tajik & Ranjbar 2018; Baharuddin et al. 2020). Institutions have initiated strategies like teaching journals and peer observations to integrate RT into professional development (Sirutis & Massi 2014; Anyiendah 2014). Further research is needed to explore RT's role in TL and identify best practices.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the identified gaps in theories, practices, and reviewed literature, this study intended to answer the following basic research questions.

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between RT and TL?

RQ2: What are the recurring themes in the participants' concepts of RT and TL?

RQ3: What are the implications of RT and TL on teaching practice?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Thirty educators with active teaching contracts in the academic year 2021 to 2022 were randomly selected to participate in this current study. They are from three educational levels in both public and private educational institutions in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Most of the educator participants are teaching at the primary educational level for eleven years or more and possess a bachelor's degree qualification (see Appendix A).

Research Design and Ethical Procedures

Under the mixed methods sequential explanatory design, the study included three stages of data processing, namely: preliminary protocols, primary data collection, and the primary data analytics. In the first stage, the participants who expressed in writing their prior, free, and informed consent to participate in the study were given alphanumeric codes (PTxx- primary teacher; STxx-secondary teacher; TTxx-tertiary teacher) as their unique identifiers to protect their personal information and to ensure their anonymity and privacy.

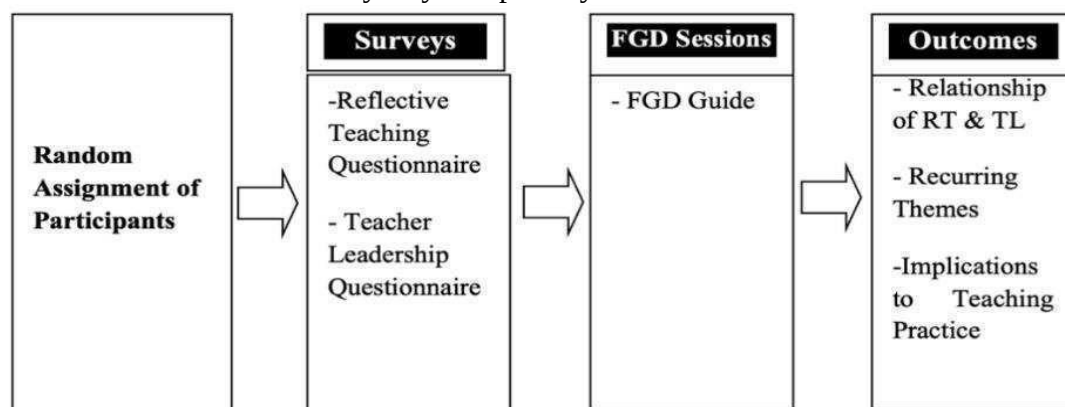


Figure 2:
Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory Design Flow Chart

In the second stage, two electronic survey questionnaires were distributed to participants via email. They first evaluated the teachers' level of RT, and the second assessed their level of TL. Based on the survey findings, a series of online focus group discussions (FGD) were held with ten participants. These participants were grouped by their educational level: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

During the FGD, the facilitator outlined its purpose, and participants introduced themselves by stating their names and affiliations. They were then asked to share their opinions on TL and RT practices within their organizations. Each participant had an opportunity to speak and agree or disagree with others, while the facilitator provided probing insights. The session concluded with a summary and thanks to the participants. The attendance and retrieval rates for the surveys and FGD were both 100%.

In the third stage, primary data was processed, and correlation and regression tests were conducted to analyze the relationships between the variables. FGD recordings were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Two recurring themes emerged: RT practices and TL's governing self-image. The FGD content was then classified into these themes.

To validate the reliability of the survey items, Cronbach alpha tests were performed, yielding a result of 0.72 for the RT questionnaire, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Levels of RT & TL and Their Significance of Relationship

The overall level of RT practices is 3.35, interpreted as “Exceptionally Average,” with pre-reflection practices being the lowest at 2.12 and pedagogical reflection practices the highest at 4.55. This indicates that the participant’s average RT is between 51 and 60 percent. The pedagogical reflection finding aligns with Ryken and Hamel’s (2016) observation that educators typically reflect on methods that impact their teaching. Such reflection encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and analysis of teaching effectiveness, enabling educators to connect new concepts to students’ prior knowledge and engage them more effectively.

On the other hand, the overall level of TL practices is 4.10, categorized as “Exceptionally High,” with all five indicators showing exceptionally high levels. This indicates a TL practice level between 71 and 80 percent. Although the participants’ overall TL is not directly linked to RT practices, there is a noted correlation between RT and TL at the pedagogical reflection level. This suggests that educators’ high level of pedagogical reflection enhances their TL practices (Sirutis & Massi, 2014).

Table 1: The Correlation Results of LEI, YTE, and LEA with RT and TL

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Reflective Teaching (RT)</i>	<i>Teacher Leadership (TL)</i>
Level of Educational Instruction (LEI)	0.47	0.25
Years of Teaching Experience (YTE)	0.08*	0.42
Level Educational Attainment (LEA)	0.60	0.55
RT	—	0.025**

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the 0.10 level (two-tailed).

Table 1 presents the correlation analysis of the moderating variables with RT and TL practices. The results indicate that LEI, YTE, and LEA exceed the 0.05 significance level, suggesting that these moderating variables do not significantly impact TL. However, YTE is significantly correlated with RT at a 0.10 level of significance. This finding aligns with Ostaz (2011) and Orakci (2021), who reported that LEA has no significant influence on TL, except for YTE, which affects RT practices. This suggests that extended formal teaching experience enhances RT practices, reinforcing the importance of professional teaching experience in fostering reflective teaching. Without sufficient experience, reflection may become superficial and lead to ineffective conclusions.

Furthermore, to address RQ1, Table 1 reveals a significant relationship between RT and TL at the 0.05 level of significance. Since these two variables are correlated, the researchers further analyzed the effect of RT on TL. The findings suggest that educators' RT practices predict their TL, indicating that reflection directly influences teaching leadership. Higher levels of reflective practice led to stronger TL, as shown in Appendix C.

This finding supports the assertions of Brookfield (2017) and DeHart (2011), who emphasized that critical collaboration among educators enhances their ability to reflect collectively, thereby improving TL. Through collaborative reflection, educators can better respond to students' instructional needs and meet performance standards. This highlights the classroom as a crucial environment for cultivating reflective practitioners in a safe, open, and non-judgmental space. Such an environment fosters a learning culture where educators critically assess their practice, identify areas for improvement, and explore solutions.

Newell (2024) further explains that the social aspect of RT allows educators to analyze their teaching and leadership in a continuous cycle of professional learning. Reflective educators assess how their teaching methods impact student learning, evaluate instructional strategies, and explore alternative ways to present concepts effectively. Unlike isolated classrooms, RT practitioners engage in regular discussions, constructive disagreements, and proactive strategies to refine their practices, ultimately contributing to institutional goals (Brookfield, 2017).

Recurring Themes

To answer RQ2, Table 2 reveals the recurring themes in RT and TL practices as perceived and experienced by the participants. Accordingly, they identified a teacher leader as someone who possesses the traits of being "collaborative, passionate, and selfless" in terms of ensuring teaching and learning standards in meeting instructional goals. As participant TT-010 articulated, "A [sic] educator who takes the lead in developing instruction and professional competence to meet the instructional goals/standards." TT-005 concurred by saying "A committed educator who leads others passionately toward achieving a goal." These findings corroborate the roles of a teacher leader as defined by DeHart (2011) and Hamzah et al. (201G).

Table 2: Matrix of Themes and Frequency Distribution

<i>Moderating Techniques</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Recurring Themes</i>	<i>Frequency Count (Ranking Order)</i>	<i>Anecdotal Description Techniques</i>
1.Top-of-mind Association	What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the words "teacher leader"?	Someone who meets professional standards and instructional goals	50%	Delivers effective, relevant, and engaging instructions
2. Constructing Images	Who do you consider a "teacher leader"? What does he/she look like? What kind of life does he/she live?	Collaborative	40%	Facilitates teamwork to achieve instructional and school goals
		Passionate	20%	Perform duties and responsibilities exceeding expectations
		Selfless	20%	Puts others' interest before themselves
3. Querying Meaning Context	Tell me about the most common situation in which you would reflect on your teaching practice.	After an assessment of learners' performance	G0%	Specifically, when learners do not meet the standards/objectives
	Describe to me a scenario in which you would exercise leadership in your teaching practice.	During an empowerment situation	40%	In an instance when there is an immediate need that can be fulfilled within their authority and/or means. However, a heavy workload and vague policies (cited by G0%) prevent educators from doing RT and TL practices
4. Projective Technique: Sentence Completion	Teachers who reflect and exercise leadership in their practice create . (one or two words) on their profession, students, schools, and communities.	Impact	50%	Social effects (immediate)
		Transformations	30%	Organizational effect (long-term)
		Competence	20%	Personal effect (direct)

This perception led this current study to probe specific instances in the teaching and learning process in which the participants were able to practice RT and TL. Most of them cited post-assessment scenarios especially when their learners' performance did not meet instructional objectives or standards. Other participants recognized this kind of scenario as an empowering situation where they could do something to bridge or fill in the learning gaps within their authority and capacity. PT-003 recalled that "I reflect usually if the students do not meet the objective/s of the lesson." TT-010 saw this situation as an opportunity saying, "When I see an immediate need that I can meet/deliver, I do something about it within my means." However, PT-002 lamented that "Heavy teaching schedules and unclear policies sometimes prevent me from doing those." This was concurred by PT-003 with a recommendation saying that "Teachers should be provided with sufficient time to be able to do those." These findings confirm the role and the challenges of RT in the learning process as observed by Wenner and Campbell (2017) and Bawaneh et al. (2020).

Finally, when inquired about what the participants thought about the influence of reflective teaching and teacher leadership in their practice, most of them mentioned "impact" as the word associated with the concept of RT-TL practices. TT-007 clarified that it referred to the "fulfillment of professional goals that leads to a positive impact on the organization." Raising a parallel point, ST-00G conjectured that RT-TL practices connote taking "a lead role in the social transformation of an organization." These findings confirm the observations of Nerlino (2020) on the dynamic roles of RT and TL in the learning process.

Implications to Practice

The third research question (RQ3) explored the implications of this study on RT-TL practices. Findings indicate that assessment outcomes, particularly when learners fail to meet performance standards, drive RT practices. Educators recognize opportunities for TL when they can address learning gaps within their authority. However, heavy workloads, limited time, and unclear instructional policies hinder RT-TL practices, which should not be restricted to assessments alone. These findings suggest the following implications.

First, a culture of learning must be cultivated. When RT-TL becomes ingrained in educators' professional identity, they are more likely to self-regulate their teaching. Organizational structures should support bottom-up decision-making, giving educators more autonomy, collaboration, and critical dialogue. Formal leaders should facilitate these discussions, ensuring that teachers feel empowered to challenge ideas and reflect on instructional practices (Anyiendah, 2014). Regular meetings—weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly—can provide structured opportunities for this dialogue.

Second, fostering a community of practitioners strengthens this culture. If organizations adjust their structures, teaching teams can network around shared challenges (Brookfield, 2017; Newell, 2024). Learning teams can collaborate on strategies to enhance engagement (e.g., gamified lessons) and improve performance (e.g., cooperative problem-solving). Peer mentorship can further support this process, where junior educators observe senior colleagues' classes and vice versa, exchanging best practices and diverse perspectives. Safe, welcoming spaces should be established, and designated time allotted for collaboration.

Third, a climate of innovation should sustain both the culture and community of practice. Instructional policies should empower educators to choose interventions that best bridge learning gaps.

Teachers should have autonomy to design authentic, varied assessments that accommodate different learning styles and reinforce soft skills (Cosenza, 2015; Araskal & Kilinc, 2015). Schools and universities can support this by integrating alternative assessments and allocating instructional time for interventions based on post-moderation evaluations.

RT-TL should be seen as an integral part of pedagogy rather than a reactive approach. It harnesses educators' reflective insights, which might otherwise go unutilized. For RT-TL practices to thrive, sustained administrative support—through policies and procedures—is essential. Schools and universities must create environments where educators can continuously refine their instructional competence, ultimately benefiting the teaching-learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

This study finds that RT practices predict educators' TL (RQ1). A weaker but notable correlation exists between YTE and RT practices. The results suggest a reciprocal relationship between pedagogical reflection and TL—teachers reflect to lead, and leading prompts further reflection, forming a cycle of reflective TL.

These findings align with the critical reflection framework. Higher levels of pedagogical reflection help educators assess their teaching's impact on students and take leadership actions based on broader sociological, economic, cultural, political, and historical contexts (RQ2).

However, this study is limited to an Arab cultural context. Future research should examine the RT-TL relationship in diverse settings, particularly its role in instructional transformation. These findings point to this direction for further inquiry.

Integrating reflective practice and TL into school and university systems fosters a learning culture, professional community, and climate of innovation (RQ3). When these elements are sustained, educators are more likely to reflect as a means of leadership. Teachers who engage in reflective practices continually refine their teaching, benefiting both themselves and their academic communities. Reflective TL thus serves as a key driver of educational growth and transformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- [1]1 Allocate sufficient time for teachers to engage in reflective practices and incorporate reflections into lesson plans, report forms, journals, and diaries.
- [1]2 Establish a program that encourages reflection and collaboration among teachers, organizing them into groups based on grade level and subject area to share and refine effective pedagogical approaches.
- [1]3 Demonstrate and refine exemplary teaching leadership and practices to foster innovation, creativity, and engagement within the campus and community, promoting professional growth and empowering teachers to meet diverse student needs.

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Appendix

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