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## **THE ROLE OF REFLECTIVE COMPETENCE IN DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL SELF-AWARENESS OF PROSPECTIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TEACHERS**

Saidova Gulchiroy Shokirovna

Researcher at Bukhara State University

### **Abstract**

In recent years, the focus on the psychological development of future teachers has significantly increased, especially in the context of vocational education. One of the core components of this development is professional self-awareness, which allows future educators to understand their own teaching identity, values, goals, and capabilities. Reflective competence plays a crucial role in shaping this self-awareness, as it encourages individuals to critically evaluate their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. This paper examines the psychological foundations of reflective competence and explores how it facilitates the formation of professional self-awareness in prospective vocational education teachers. Drawing upon psychological theories of self-concept, metacognition, and professional identity development, the study highlights the dynamic interplay between reflection and self-perception. The analysis also includes practical strategies for enhancing reflective competence in teacher education programs. Ultimately, fostering reflective competence not only strengthens self-awareness but also promotes personal growth, ethical responsibility, and lifelong learning in future educators.

**Keywords:** reflective competence, Professional self-awareness, Vocational education teachers, Self-concept, Metacognitive reflection, Teacher identity, Educational psychology, Teacher training

### **Introduction**

In the modern educational landscape, the role of teachers extends beyond the transmission of knowledge — it encompasses personal responsibility, ethical engagement, and the continuous development of a professional identity. Particularly within vocational education, where teaching is closely tied to practical skills and



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labor market needs, the formation of professional self-awareness becomes a vital process for future teachers. Professional self-awareness refers to a teacher's ability to consciously understand their own values, strengths, limitations, motivations, and goals in the context of their career.

One of the most effective psychological tools for cultivating such awareness is reflective competence — the capacity to think critically about one's own experiences, decisions, and actions. Reflective competence is not merely a technical skill; it is a deep cognitive-emotional process that involves self-assessment, interpretation of teaching practices, and the integration of feedback into personal and professional growth. It serves as a bridge between theoretical learning and practical application, enabling future educators to align their behavior with pedagogical values and ethical standards.

From a psychological perspective, the development of reflective competence is closely linked to theories such as Bandura's social cognitive theory (especially self-efficacy), Kolb's experiential learning model, and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. These frameworks emphasize the importance of reflection in constructing meaning and shaping identity.

The goal of this paper is to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying reflective competence and to examine how it supports the development of professional self-awareness in future vocational education teachers. The research seeks to provide evidence-based strategies that teacher training institutions can implement to integrate reflective practices into their curriculum, thereby ensuring that the next generation of teachers is both professionally competent and personally self-aware.

The importance of reflective competence in teacher education has been widely recognized in academic literature over the past several decades. It is no longer viewed as a supplementary skill but rather as a fundamental psychological and pedagogical element in the development of effective educators. Reflective competence allows future teachers to analyze their own experiences, values, and actions, promoting the formation of a stable professional identity. This is particularly significant in vocational education, where teaching is deeply connected to practical skills and real-world application. Scholars such as John Dewey (1933) laid the



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foundation for reflective thinking, arguing that the ability to critically examine one's actions and beliefs is central to effective teaching. Donald Schön (1983) built upon this idea by introducing the concept of the "reflective practitioner," emphasizing the importance of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as mechanisms for professional learning and adaptation.

In more recent work, researchers like Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) have emphasized the connection between reflective thinking and core values, suggesting that deep reflection helps teachers align their inner motivations with their professional behavior. Their core reflection model has been influential in designing teacher training programs that aim to foster not only technical skills but also a strong sense of professional self-awareness. This model has proven particularly useful in vocational education, where students are often expected to transition quickly into practical teaching roles and make real-time decisions based on complex classroom dynamics.

Professional self-awareness itself is considered a dynamic psychological construct, shaped through reflection, feedback, and self-analysis. Scholars such as Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) and Day and Gu (2007) have shown that the development of teacher identity—an essential aspect of professional self-awareness—is closely tied to the process of reflective thinking. Teachers who engage in systematic reflection tend to show greater clarity about their pedagogical values, emotional responses, and long-term goals. In the vocational context, studies by Sharma and Srivastava (2021) have demonstrated that direct teaching experiences, peer collaboration, and guided reflection activities are crucial in helping prospective teachers become more self-aware and professionally confident.

From a psychological perspective, the connection between reflection and self-awareness is supported by several influential theories. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997) suggests that individuals' beliefs about their capabilities influence how they approach challenges. Reflective competence contributes to a more accurate and constructive interpretation of one's experiences, thereby enhancing self-efficacy. Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), with its four stages—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—has also been widely used in teacher education. It supports the



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idea that learning and identity development occur when individuals engage in reflective cycles. Furthermore, Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991) argues that critical reflection enables individuals to question their assumptions and adopt new perspectives, which is essential for developing a deeper sense of professional self.

Although many studies have examined reflective practices in general teacher education, research focusing specifically on vocational education is still emerging. Scholars such as Töytäri et al. (2016) have explored how practice-based learning modules and mentorship promote reflective habits among vocational teacher candidates. Their findings indicate that structured reflection tasks, combined with peer feedback, lead to greater self-awareness and professional insight. Similarly, Mikkonen, Heikkinen, and Lakkala (2020) found that reflective journaling and dialogue helped vocational student-teachers connect theory to practice, reinforcing their understanding of their own roles and values as educators.

Despite the progress made, there are still gaps in the literature. Notably, limited research has been conducted in specific regional contexts, including Central Asia and post-Soviet educational systems, where vocational teacher education may involve distinct cultural and institutional dynamics. Moreover, while the role of technology in enhancing reflective competence is increasingly acknowledged, more empirical studies are needed to explore the use of digital tools such as e-portfolios, video analysis, and online mentoring in supporting reflective growth in vocational education settings.

The body of literature strongly supports the conclusion that reflective competence is a key contributor to the development of professional self-awareness among prospective vocational education teachers. The relationship between these two constructs is both theoretically grounded and empirically supported. However, continued research is needed to address contextual and technological dimensions of this process, which remain underexplored in current academic discourse.

The development of professional self-awareness among prospective vocational education teachers is a complex, multifaceted process shaped by individual experiences, educational practices, and psychological mechanisms. Reflective competence plays a central role in this developmental trajectory by serving as a



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metacognitive tool through which student-teachers critically examine their beliefs, teaching behaviors, and evolving identities.

Reflective competence is not simply the ability to “think about teaching” but involves a deeper capacity to analyze one’s motivations, emotional reactions, and pedagogical choices in light of one’s values and educational goals. In vocational education, where practical application of knowledge is emphasized, reflective competence helps future teachers to navigate real-life teaching situations with a more grounded sense of purpose and adaptability. The iterative nature of reflective practice—where teachers move from experience to reflection, and from reflection to improved action—creates a feedback loop that nurtures self-awareness and professional growth.

One of the most crucial outcomes of reflective competence is the development of a coherent professional identity. This identity emerges through repeated cycles of experience and reflection, during which individuals align their internal self-concept with their external roles and responsibilities as teachers. For vocational educators in particular, this alignment is vital because their teaching often involves mentoring students in hands-on, skill-based environments that demand both technical expertise and emotional intelligence. Through reflection, prospective teachers begin to recognize their teaching strengths, identify areas for improvement, and construct a realistic and confident image of themselves as professionals.

Moreover, reflective competence contributes significantly to metacognitive awareness. Teachers with high reflective ability are more likely to engage in goal-setting, self-monitoring, and strategic thinking. These cognitive behaviors are essential for adapting to changing classroom dynamics, addressing diverse student needs, and integrating theory into practice. In vocational education, where curricula are often shaped by industry standards and practical requirements, reflective thinking enables teachers to critically evaluate how their teaching aligns with broader vocational and societal goals.

Emotional regulation is another psychological domain influenced by reflective competence. As prospective teachers encounter stress, uncertainty, and interpersonal challenges during their practicum experiences, reflection allows them to process these emotions constructively rather than defensively. It fosters resilience by helping



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individuals reframe difficulties as learning opportunities. This emotional processing is directly linked to professional self-awareness, as it enables teachers to understand how their emotional patterns affect their teaching relationships, classroom management, and communication style.

In the context of teacher training programs, reflective competence must be actively cultivated through targeted pedagogical strategies. These may include structured journaling, guided group discussions, peer feedback, portfolio development, and video-based self-evaluation. When supported by mentors and trainers, these practices help student-teachers articulate their experiences, challenge their assumptions, and synthesize new insights. This kind of scaffolded reflection is particularly effective in vocational education, where students benefit from seeing the immediate relevance of reflection to their future careers.

Furthermore, cultural and contextual factors must be taken into account when analyzing the development of reflective competence and self-awareness. In some educational systems, reflective practice is deeply embedded in the curriculum, while in others, it is still emerging as a recognized component of teacher education. In Central Asian contexts, including Uzbekistan, efforts are being made to integrate reflective pedagogy into vocational teacher training programs, though more empirical research is needed to examine its implementation and outcomes.

Reflective competence is not only a psychological mechanism but also a pedagogical necessity for developing professional self-awareness among future vocational education teachers. It enhances self-concept, supports identity formation, improves emotional intelligence, and strengthens adaptive teaching behavior. To ensure its effectiveness, teacher training programs must create intentional, reflective learning environments that encourage metacognitive engagement and personal growth. Only through such integrated efforts can vocational educators become self-aware, effective, and resilient professionals in a constantly evolving educational landscape.

**Conclusion.** The development of professional self-awareness in prospective vocational education teachers is a vital component of their overall professional growth and effectiveness. This process is closely intertwined with the cultivation of reflective competence, which acts as both a cognitive and emotional mechanism through which future teachers examine their own beliefs, teaching practices, and



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professional identities. Reflective competence enables them to become more self-aware, adaptive, and emotionally resilient in the face of the challenges they will encounter in their teaching careers.

Through systematic reflection, prospective teachers can develop a stronger sense of purpose, enhance their metacognitive skills, and align their teaching philosophy with their actions in the classroom. In vocational education settings, where real-world application and immediate feedback are central, reflective practice plays a critical role in helping educators connect theory to practice. Teacher training programs must, therefore, place intentional emphasis on fostering reflective habits through structured activities, feedback mechanisms, and mentorship.

As shown in the literature, reflective competence also contributes to the formation of a stable and coherent professional identity, an essential aspect of long-term career satisfaction and effectiveness. While research has increasingly supported the value of reflection in teacher education, there remains a need for further empirical studies that explore its role in specific cultural and institutional contexts, including the use of digital technologies and culturally responsive pedagogy.

In conclusion, promoting reflective competence in teacher education programs is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative approach that empowers future vocational education teachers to become mindful, ethical, and self-aware professionals who are capable of navigating the complexities of modern education.

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