

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AMONG IN-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS IN A  
SECONDARY SCHOOL IN JOHOR

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, for believing in me all this while. Appoi and Amma, your love and support kept me going. I am indebted to you forever.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to thank Dr. Hema Rosheny Binti Mustafa for her endless support and encouragement. Her insights and guidance helped me to steer this research in the right direction. I am also thankful to all the teachers who took part in this study. I am greatly indebted to the SISC+ Officers in Kulai for their time and support. I am also grateful to all my family members for their love, care and understanding throughout this journey. Appoi and Amma, you always inspire me to be better. So, thank you for being you. I would also like to thank my friends who listened to my rants and kept me sane.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study was carried out to determine the aspects of effective reflective practice from the perspectives of the teachers and SISC+ officers, to explore the current reflective practice among English language teachers in a secondary school in Kulai and to investigate the perceptions of the teachers towards the SISC+ officers in supporting reflective practice among the teachers. The respondents of this study consisted of the English language teachers in a secondary school in Kulai and SISC+ Officers in Kulai district. This study was done qualitatively through document analysis of reflections written by the teachers, focus groups conducted among the English language teachers and semi-structured interviews with the SISC+ Officers. The data gathered were analysed qualitatively. The findings of this study show that the teachers and SISC+ Officers believe that having the ability to reflect on the lessons should be continuous, consistent and timely to empower future learning. The findings also show that the teachers display a high level of reflective practice in their daily teaching. In addition, the findings also reveal that the SISC+ Officers play a vital role in supporting reflective practice among teachers. Two-pronged approach should be developed to further strengthen the support system between the SISC+ Officers and teachers. Further longitudinal study should be carried out with the addition of journal writing to gauge if the teachers' self-belief change over the course of time.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menentukan aspek amalan reflektif berkesan dari perspektif guru dan pegawai SISC+, untuk meneroka amalan reflektif semasa di kalangan guru bahasa Inggeris di sebuah sekolah menengah di Kulai dan untuk menyiasat persepsi guru terhadap SISC+ pegawai dalam menyokong amalan reflektif di kalangan guru. Responden kajian ini terdiri daripada guru bahasa Inggeris di sebuah sekolah menengah di Kulai dan Pegawai SISC+ di daerah Kulai. Kajian ini dilakukan secara kualitatif melalui analisis dokumen refleksi yang ditulis oleh guru, kumpulan fokus yang dilakukan di kalangan guru bahasa Inggeris dan temu ramah separa berstruktur dengan Pegawai SISC+. Data yang dikumpulkan dianalisis secara kualitatif. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa guru dan Pegawai SISC+ percaya bahawa mempunyai kemampuan untuk merenungkan pelajaran harus berterusan, konsisten dan tepat pada masanya untuk memperkasakan pembelajaran masa depan. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa guru menunjukkan amalan reflektif yang tinggi dalam pengajaran harian mereka. Di samping itu, hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa Pegawai SISC+ memainkan peranan penting dalam menyokong amalan reflektif di kalangan guru. Pendekatan serampang dua mata harus dikembangkan untuk mengukuhkan lagi sistem sokongan antara Pegawai dan guru SISC+. Kajian membujur selanjutnya harus dilakukan dengan penambahan jurnal untuk mengukur apakah kepercayaan diri guru berubah seiring berjalannya waktu.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

RQ	-	Research Question
LET	-	Learn English Together
SISC+	-	School Improvement Specialist Coach

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a brief background of the study and put forward the statement of the problem. In addition, this chapter will also outline the research objectives, research questions that this study seek to address and also the significance of the study. Furthermore, the conceptual framework underlying this research will be presented and explored in this chapter. This will be followed by the scope and limitations of the present study which can inform future research. Finally, essential terms like in-service teachers and reflection will be introduced and defined in this chapter.

### 1.2 Background of the Study

There is a wealth of research on pre-service teachers and the importance of educating them to become successful reflective practitioners in the last century (Borg, 1998, 1999, 2003; Breen, et al., 2001; Farrell & Lim, 2005). Upon graduation, these pre-service teachers become teachers and serve in schools but the term ‘reflection’ slowly fades away and gets replaced with other important things like teaching strategies and classroom management. This is the main reason as to why there is limited research on reflective practice among in-service teachers. In a way, the in-service teachers are actually hoped to develop themselves to become reflective practitioners. Developed countries like England places lots of emphasis on reflection by Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) standards guidance (Tarrant, 2013). For example, QTS standards guidance Q7 (a) outlines that educators are required to:

Reflect on and improve their teaching practice, and take accountability for recognising and meeting their developing professional needs.

In the context of new professionalism, educators find themselves increasingly both honing their skills as coaches and mentors, as well as benefitting from the coaching and mentoring that they obtain. (GTC, 2008)

I would like to argue that, there is no standard guidelines like the QTS in England for the teachers in Malaysia to follow. No doubt that there is informal and unwritten rules which advocate for reflection in the classroom and after the lesson but there needs to be a set of guidelines as to what constitutes “good” reflection and how to reflect effectively on the lessons for future lesson planning. Jamil, Razak, Raju and Mohamed (2014) concur by agreeing to the situation in Malaysian schools.

Reflection among in-service teachers in Malaysia are fairly under-researched (Jamil, Razak, Raju & Mohamed, 2014) and this study aims to explore what constitutes effective reflective practice among the teachers and SISC+ Officers. “The incessant expansion of societies entails a rising need for individuals who are prepared rather well for their career. In order to establish whether individuals are prepared well, measurement and assessment procedures can be used (Kayapinar, 2016). Although a review of the research does not yield any research quantifying the reflective practice of language teachers in institutions, widespread study does exist on language teacher education, reflection, and teacher beliefs as independent areas (Avalos, 2011; Craig, 2013; Peacock, 2009; Riley, 2009; Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

It was pupils’ criticisms about their educator’s lowly performances, high attrition rates of the preceding academic year, and the notion that their educators’ performances ought to be enhanced that paved the way to in-service teachers’ professional development processes using a new model to develop teachers’ reflective abilities and self-efficacy beliefs. To support this claim, Mansor, Fisher, Rasul, Ibrahim and Yusoff (2012) claimed that the passion and pride in the teaching profession, is really dissolving, albeit slowly yet surely in Malaysia. Therefore, there is a need to empower the teachers to become reflective practitioners so that they can improve themselves and stay motivated in their career. Perceived self-efficacy can be

well-defined as the beliefs of the people about their own competences to yield designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that have an impact on their lives (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy beliefs will govern how people feel, think and motivate themselves. Such beliefs will result in these varied effects through four major processes. They encompass cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes. Self-efficacy is also related to the convictions of people about their own competences to efficaciously perform a course of action leading them to a preferred consequence (Bandura, 1977). It is directly related to a person's judgment of his or her abilities and sense of aptitude within a specific framework. In other words, it concentrates on a person's *own* assessment of his/her *own* capabilities in relation to objectives and standards, constructed on personal previous experiences of mastery. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers should have high self-efficacy to continue performing their best as well as to inspire their learners to work harder. One way to develop this is through promoting reflective practice among teachers. Brookfield (2017) argues the need for critical reflection to enhance self-efficacy among teachers.

Ministry of Education's importance on credentials, higher remuneration and better profession path does not seem to translate into excellent teachers, it is more like working around the edges of the issue rather than finding a solution deemed fit. Therefore, the results within the boundaries of Mansor, Fisher, Rasul, Ibrahim and Yusoff's (2012) research recommend that current efforts to improve the quality of educators are deteriorating implicating that further research into the 'soft' skills required in the field of teacher training is greatly needed. It is firmly believed that better reflective practitioners will be able to teach with 'passion' and thus result in better learning experience for both, the students as well as the teachers.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

The phenomenon that the researcher wish to explore in this study is how reflective practice among English teachers in a secondary school build the teachers' values, beliefs and practices in their classroom. The researcher would like to also look "effective" reflective practice from the perspectives of teachers and SISC+ officers to observe if there is a match or even a mismatch between them. If so, how can they be

bridged together? Not only that, this research will attempt to explore the current reflective practice among the English language teachers in the school. Reflective practice entails that teachers scrutinise their own personal values and beliefs about the process of education in order for them to have more accountability for their classroom actions (Farrell, 2004). The role of SISC+ officers in school is also somewhat contestable because they come over to schools to mentor the teachers but many teachers are afraid when they observe lessons. This could be due to lack of self-confidence to perform well under the observation or perhaps teachers do not understand the role of an SISC+ officer. They are in schools to support the teachers and not to “judge” the teaching performance. Since the major role of an SISC+ officer is to result in better teaching, they should also be supporting teachers to become reflective practitioners as only a teacher who reflects on his or her teaching is deemed to improve to design better lessons for optimum teaching.

Teaching requires teachers to be reflective and thoughtful as it influences their decision-making that underpins their teaching process. This usually entails that they actively construct personal concepts of teaching by reflecting on their personal deep-rooted belief systems and examining how these are applied in real classroom practice (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Woods (1996) proposes that teachers must be on guard against “claim[ing] allegiance to beliefs consistent with what they perceive as the current teaching paradigm rather than consistent with their unmonitored beliefs and their behaviour in class” (p. 71). Having said that, this study is hoped to shed some light into how the SISC+ officers can promote reflective practice among in-service teachers. This goes to show that reflective practice should be a continuous and dynamic process that moulds a teacher for an entire career. Sometimes, teachers need extra support to give them a sense of guidance so peers, other experienced teachers and SISC+ officers can be of assistance.

By constantly developing themselves as reflective practitioners, language teachers can seek any contradictions between their personal beliefs and practices. Smith (2010) argues that the results of a systematic reflection to teaching will not only serve to improve one’s teaching but will additionally serve to improve student learning as well. The beliefs of the language teachers has a key role in their classroom practices. As Harste and Burke (1977) hypothesised, educators take decisions about classroom



instruction by relying on theoretical beliefs they have on education process. Their beliefs have an impact on their objectives, techniques, resources, classroom communication arrangements, their characters, their learners, and the institutions that they teach. Elsewhere, Richards and Rodgers (2001) argue that educators hold preconceived ideas about language and language learning. This will largely influence the adoption of a specific methodology to language teaching. Therefore, it is argued that if theoretical underpinnings is a major factor of how teachers teach during language lessons, then teacher educators can affect classroom practice by ensuring that teachers develop a theoretical orientation that is reflective of current and pertinent research in the field (Cummins, Cheek, & Lindsey, 2004, p. 183). Hence, it is crucial that teachers are constantly immersed in reflective practice to improve their classroom practice.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

This study will address three research objectives. The objectives of this research are to:

1. determine the aspects of ‘effective’ reflective practice from the perspectives of the teachers and SISC+ officers
2. explore the current reflective practice among English language teachers in a secondary school
3. investigate the perceptions of the teachers towards the SISC+ officers in supporting reflective practice

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

This study aims to answer three research questions. The research questions are as follows:

1. What constitutes ‘effective’ reflective practice from the perspective of the teachers and the SISC+ officers?
2. To what extent do the English language teachers implement reflective practice in their lessons?
3. What are the teachers’ perceptions of the SISC+ officers in supporting reflective practice among teachers?

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study is very much significant to uncover the present reflective practice in a secondary school to get an idea of how the teachers perceive reflection and translate them into their reflection writing. Although this research cannot represent the larger population, it serves as a benchmark to gauge the reflective practice of teachers. This case study is expected to shed some light into what constitutes ‘effective’ reflective practice from teachers and the SISC+ officers’ perspectives. It is also hoped that the teachers in Kulai district can be equipped with strategies that can be employed to be reflective, especially English language teachers. It is believed that reflective practitioners will be able to evaluate their teaching critically and devise solutions to improve future lessons. This will result in better student engagement and participation in the class, which is crucial for language learning.

Reflective teaching is a tool that teachers can use to observe and evaluate the way they behave in their classroom. It can be both a private process as well as one that teachers can discuss with colleagues (Moon, 2006). When teachers collect information regarding what went on in their classroom and take the time to analyse it from a distance, they can identify more than just what worked and what did not. They will be able to look at the underlying principles and beliefs that define the way that they work. This kind of self-awareness is a powerful tool for a teacher, especially when so much of what and how they teach can change in the moment (Moon, 2006).

Reflective practice is also beyond describing the events that took place in the classroom. If a teacher spends her time narrating what happened in the class, it is likely that she might arrive at abrupt deductions about why things happened as they did during the class. As such, reflective teaching is a discreet and systemic approach to looking at what happened by using a different lens. It requires patience, and careful observation of the entire lesson’s experience.

Moon (2006) also mentions that:

“A reflective approach to teaching involves changes in the way we usually perceive teaching and our role in the process of teaching. Teachers who explore their own teaching through critical reflection develop changes in attitudes and awareness

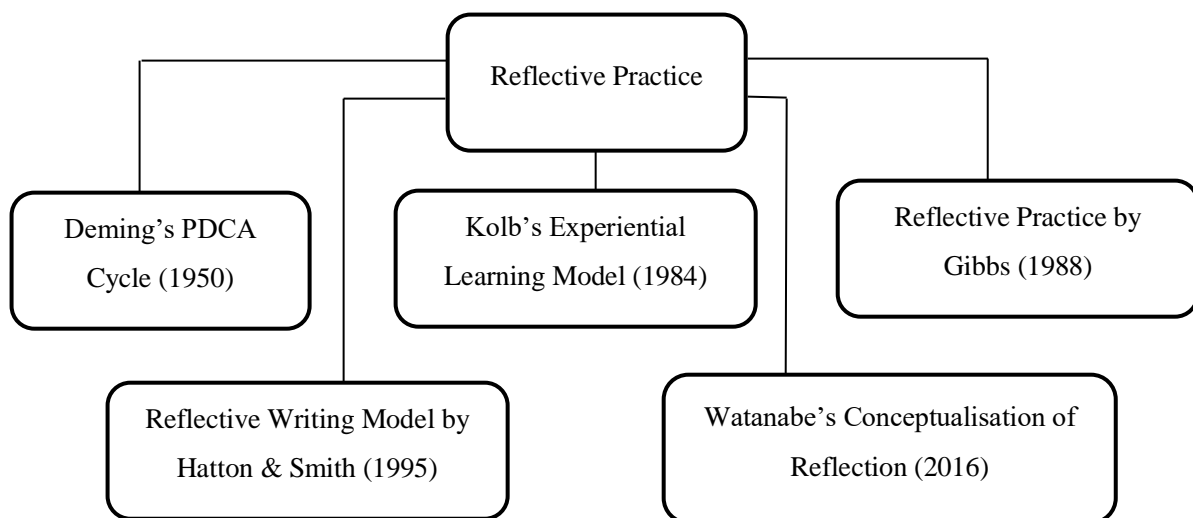
which they believe can benefit their professional growth as teachers, as well as improve the kind of support they provide their students. Like other forms of self-inquiry, reflective teaching is not without its risks, since journal writing, self-reporting or making recordings of lessons can be time-consuming. However teachers engaged in reflective analysis of their own teaching report that it is a valuable tool for self-evaluation and professional growth. Reflective teaching suggests that experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, but that experience coupled with reflection can be a powerful impetus for teacher development.”

Therefore, this research is significant to explore the reflective practice among teachers in a school to gauge how well they reflect on their current teaching. By knowing this important information, forms of support can be identified to further enhance reflective practice among teachers in schools.

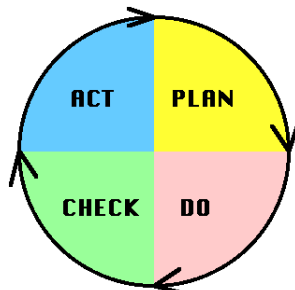
### 1.7 Conceptual Framework

This study was based on Deming’s PDCA Cycle (1950), Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (1984), Reflective Practice by Gibbs (1988), Reflective Writing Model by Hatton and Smith (1995) and finally Watanabe’s Conceptualisation of Reflection (2016). The main reasons for choosing them because they place reflection at the heart of their research.

**Figure 1.1:** Conceptual Framework



All these frameworks are discussed in length in Chapter 2 (2.4). Deming's PDCA Cycle (1950) was the basis for many educators that propose reflective practice among teachers. It can be summarised as below:



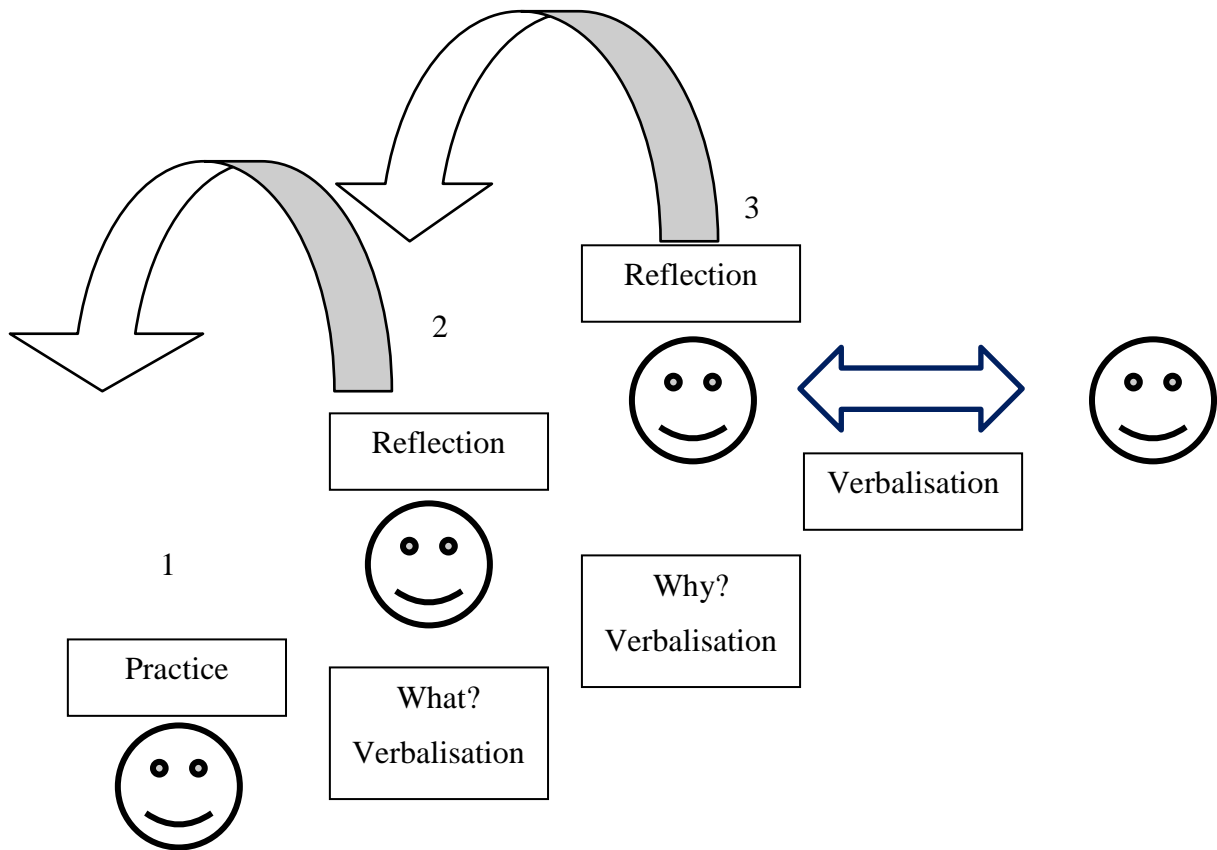
**Figure 1.2:** Stages in Deming's PDCA Cycle (1950)

The cycle can be interpreted as: teachers should start by working on a plan, then proceed to carry it out (Do), review or recheck if the need arises (Check) and act accordingly. This framework is rather popular in Japan and has been adapted by many researchers. For the purpose of this research, “plan” refers to the lesson plans that teachers produce and “do” is when they carry out their lesson with the pupils, “check” is the stage where teachers reflect and make changes if there is a need and “act” is when they implement the best solution or modification necessary in the class. This PDCA Cycle will fit in the current study because teachers often follow through these steps unconsciously.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984) is also referred to because it encompasses a four-stage cyclical theory of learning, and is deemed as a holistic perspective that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour. Since reflection is closely related with learning to empower one's self, this framework is also embedded in the current study. Reflective Practice by Gibbs (1988) on the other hand, provides insight into the notion of “learning by doing”. This is particularly useful for helping people learn from situations that they experience regularly, especially when they do not go well. Next, Hatton and Smith (1995) have stated 4 important concerns about reflection:

- “We should learn to frame and reframe complex or ambiguous problems, test out various interpretations, and then modify our actions consequently”
- “Our thoughts should be extended and systematic by looking back upon our actions shortly after they have taken place”
- “Certain activities labelled as reflective, such as the use of journals or group discussions following practical experiences, are often not directed towards the solution of specific problems”
- “We should consciously account for the wider historic, cultural, and political values or beliefs in framing practical problems to arrive at a solution. This is often identified as critical reflection. However, the term critical reflection, like reflection itself, appears to be used loosely, some taking it to mean no more than constructive self-criticism of one's actions with a view to improvement.”

Therefore, there is a need to promote more reflective activities that can be used to improve very specific problems. For instance, teachers will have to verbalise their ideas and thoughts regularly to be effective reflective practitioners, which brings me to the final framework proposed by Watanabe (2016).



**Figure 1.3:** Watanabe’s Conceptualisation of Reflection (2016)

It is interesting to note that Watanabe has introduced to the notion of “verbalisation” in her model. This is crucial in the current educational context as teaching and learning are viewed as ‘social’ processes so teachers need to verbalise their ideas and thoughts in their cycle of reflection. This study will also look at Learn English Together (LET) meetings and whether they are a good platform or avenue for teachers to verbalise their reflections together to become better reflective practitioners.

### 1.8 Scope and Limitations of the Study

For the purpose of this research, one secondary school was selected from the state of Johor. Ten English language teachers will be part of this study to shed some light into what constitutes good reflective practice. This will be an “insider research” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) because the researcher is working in the same school as the samples of the study. As an insider, the researcher can approach the respondents with ease, by drawing on existing trusting relationships in the school. However, “reactivity” “in the form of prior knowledge, underlying preconceived

ideas” (Robson, 2011) “were constant threats” that is needed to be careful about by the researcher. Being extremely “reflexive” and “seeking for interpretations from the participants helped guard against these threats.” Therefore, written reflections of the chosen ten English teachers were analysed. It is important to note that this research is conducted in the district of Kulai. It is expected that this case study approach will be able to provide insights to other teachers on how to become better practitioners. Not only that, this study will also look into the role of SISC+ officers. It is important to note that research on in-service teachers are scarce, especially in Asian countries. There are numerous literature on pre-service teachers thus this research will feed into the current gap.

The main limitation to this study is that it cannot represent the whole English language teachers’ population as this is a case study based on just one school. Therefore, the findings of this research will not be the same for other schools in the state. Longitudinal studies should be carried out in the future to see if there is any improvements in terms of the teachers’ classroom practice. Another limitation is that the samples are not randomly selected because the researcher wanted to focus on only the English language teachers because their reflections will be written in English. As such, analysing them will be easier without translating from Malay. This research can also be done among teachers who teach other subjects like History, Mathematics or Science to explore their reflective practice. Comparison can be made with the teachers according to the subjects that they teach to explore if there is any correlation between them.

## **1.9 Definition of Terms**

### *Reflection*

Reflection is more than merely thinking or musing. Reflection is a complex and intentional intellectual activity that generates learning from experience. Dewey (1933), states that “reflective thinking builds the foundation for the furtherance of democratic principles. Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983) assert that reflection helps adults cope with and learn from ill-structured, complex problems in social settings and the workplace.” Morrison (1996) on the other hand, refers to reflection as a ‘conceptual and

methodological portmanteau' in one of his works. Hence, this research will look into what are "effective" reflective practice according to the teachers and SISC+ officers.

### *In-service Teachers*

One of the earliest record of in-service education and empowerment can be seen in Billing (1976) where he describes in-service education as follows:

"staff development which is a deliberate and continuous process involving the identification and discussion of present and anticipated needs of individual staff for furthering their job satisfaction and career prospects and of the institution for supporting its academic work and plans, and implementation of programmes of staff activities designed for the harmonious satisfaction of these needs."

It is interesting to note that Billing (1976) associates in-service teachers with 'job satisfaction' and this is a powerful notion as satisfaction in the job is crucial to progress in one's career. In the education field, teachers who are able to reflect on their practice critically, are said to have better job satisfaction (Sellars, 2014). "While acknowledging the critics who argue that there is little evidence that reflection actually changes behaviour, they (Sellars, 2014) propose that the process of engaging in reflection not only provides a personal resource that can be accessed in other similar contexts, but is also a tool that empowers individuals who use it. This is because engagement with the process of focused thinking supports self-knowledge and understanding" (White, 2004; Wieringa, 2011). Having said that, in-service teachers are expected to reflect on their practice not only to improve their classroom dynamics, but also as a means to 'grow' individually.

### **1.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a background of the study and introduced the research objectives, research questions and put forward the statement of the problem. In addition, the researcher also mentioned the significance of the research. This is followed by providing the conceptual framework that will form the basis of the current study. Next, the scope and limitations of the study were presented. The important terms were defined in the context of this research.



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