



Exploring Transformative Learning in Classroom Practices: A Case Study of Teachers' Professional Development in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Dr. Sumera Imran¹, *Dr. Zahid Ullah², Sana M.Phil³, Dr. Nosheen Saba⁴

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Women Sub Campus Batkhela, University of Malakand, Sumeraimransst@yahoo.com
2. *Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSI). Institute for Training and Development ITD Amherst, MA. (Corresponding Author), zahidullah0333@gmail.com
3. Scholar Education, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, kmano5654@gmail.com
4. Assistant Director, Directorate of Elementary and Secondary Education, KP

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) is enacted in classroom practices and supports teachers' professional development in public secondary schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The study involved ten teachers (five male, five female) from five boys' secondary schools in Mardan and five girls' secondary schools in Malakand. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Findings reveal that critical reflection, collaborative dialogue, mentoring, experiential engagement, learner-centered strategies, and reflective classroom management drive transformative learning. Teachers reported shifts from teacher-centered, exam-focused instruction to learner-centered approaches, increased student engagement, enhanced professional confidence, and a stronger sense of professional agency. Despite challenges such as large classes and limited resources, reflective and collaborative practices enabled meaningful pedagogical change. The study recommends integrating transformative learning into professional development programs, fostering reflective school cultures, and providing institutional support to sustain pedagogical innovation. This research contributes context-specific insights into the processes and outcomes of transformative learning in government secondary schools in KP, Pakistan.

Keywords: Transformative Learning Theory, Classroom Practices, Teachers' Professional Development, Case Study, Critical Reflection

Introduction

Teachers' professional development is central to improving the quality of education. Traditional professional development programs often focus on short-term training sessions aimed at enhancing content knowledge or technical teaching skills, yet these approaches frequently fail to produce sustained changes in classroom practices (Avalos, 2011; Desimone, 2009). Contemporary perspectives emphasize professional development as a transformative process, involving deep reflection, shifts in beliefs, and changes in professional identity (Mezirow, 2000; Brookfield, 2017). Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) provides a framework for understanding how adults learn through critical reflection, rational discourse, and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning refers to a perspective transformation or change in worldview. Teachers in literacy education and adult basic education as well as GED

instructors can learn how to foster transformative learning. These techniques can help learners engage in critical thought and discussion with others and may gain a broader, more inclusive view of themselves and their world. In classroom contexts, TLT encourages teachers to question entrenched assumptions and adopt innovative pedagogical practices (Taylor, 2008). This study explores teachers' experiences of transformative learning and its impact on classroom practices and professional development in government secondary schools of KP, Pakistan.

Problem Statement

Despite continuous professional development initiatives, many secondary school teachers continue to employ traditional, examination-oriented teaching practices. Programs often emphasize technical skills while neglecting teachers' beliefs, assumptions, and reflective capacities. Limited empirical research demonstrates how Transformative Learning Theory operates within real classroom settings and supports teachers' professional growth, particularly in secondary education (Cranton & King, 2003; Korthagen, 2010). Therefore, this study examines teachers' experiences of transformative learning for a more progressive and advanced classroom practices and professional development.

Research Questions

1. How do secondary school teachers experience transformative learning in their classroom practices?
2. What processes facilitate transformative learning among teachers?
3. How does transformative learning influence teachers' professional development?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which conceptualizes learning as a process of perspective transformation through critical reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning begins with a disorienting dilemma that challenges existing assumptions. Through critical self-reflection and dialogue, learners revise their frames of reference and engage in transformative action (Mezirow, 2000).

Key Constructs:

- Critical reflection
- Disorienting dilemmas
- Dialogue
- Transformative action

Literature Review

Transformative learning has been widely recognized as a key approach to teachers' professional development. Reflection on entrenched assumptions, collaborative dialogue, mentoring, and experiential learning are crucial for pedagogical change and professional agency. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory explains how adults experience deep and lasting changes in their beliefs, assumptions, and ways of knowing through critical reflection and dialogue. The theory posits that individuals operate within frames of reference shaped by prior experiences, culture, and socialization, which guide interpretation but may also constrain understanding. Transformative learning is often triggered by a disorienting dilemma that challenges these existing assumptions, prompting learners to critically examine their validity. Through rational discourse with others, learners assess alternative perspectives and reconstruct meaning, leading to a perspective transformation that is more inclusive, reflective, and open to change. This process results not only in altered ways of thinking but also in changes in actions and

professional practices, making the theory particularly relevant to adult education and teacher professional development contexts (Brookfield, 2017; Cranton & King, 2003; Korthagen, 2010). Studies in developing-country contexts suggest that transformative learning helps teachers move beyond rote, exam-focused instruction toward learner-centered practices, enhancing student engagement and teacher efficacy (Taylor, 2008; Desimone, 2009). However, barriers such as rigid curricula, limited institutional support, and cultural resistance persist (Avalos, 2011; Korthagen, 2010). This study addresses these gaps by examining teachers' voices in government secondary schools, focusing on context-specific experiences of reflective practices, peer collaboration, mentoring, and classroom innovation.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative case study design was adopted to explore transformative learning in secondary school classrooms. The study included ten teachers (five male, five female) from five boys' schools in Mardan and five girls' schools in Malakand. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective accounts. Thematic analysis was conducted guided by Transformative Learning Theory.

Findings

RQ1: How do secondary school teachers experience transformative learning in their classroom practices?

Critical Reflection

"For many years, I believed strict teaching was effective. When students failed to apply concepts, I started questioning my methods." (Male, Mardan)

"Completing the syllabus was my priority, but reflection showed me that students were memorizing without understanding." (Male, Mardan)

"I realized that silence in class did not mean learning. This understanding changed my thinking." (Female, Malakand)

"Through reflection, I understood that girls learn better when they participate actively." (Female, Malakand)

"I learned to adapt my teaching strategies to the students' needs rather than just following the textbook." (Male, Mardan)

"Critical reflection made me more patient with students who struggle with concepts." (Male, Mardan)

"Seeing even small improvements in students motivated me to keep innovating." (Male, Mardan)

"Even with limited resources, changing my mindset improved classroom learning." (Male, Mardan)

"I now connect lessons to students' daily lives, which improves engagement and understanding." (Female, Malakand)

"I noticed that students were disengaged during lectures, so I started reflecting on my teaching style and realized I needed more interactive methods." (Female, Malakand)

"Reflecting on my past lessons, I understood that using only textbooks limited students' critical thinking skills." (Male, Mardan)

"I began asking students for feedback on my teaching, which made me reconsider some of my long-held assumptions." (Female, Malakand)

“Critical reflection helped me realize that grouping students for discussions increased understanding and participation.” (Male, Mardan)

“I became aware that my focus on exams was overshadowing actual learning, so I started prioritizing comprehension over rote memorization.” (Female, Malakand)

RQ2: What processes facilitate transformative learning among teachers?

Dialogue and Collaboration

“Informal discussions with colleagues helped me rethink my teaching strategies.” (Male, Mardan)

“When we shared classroom challenges, I realized change is possible even in government schools.” (Male, Mardan)

“Peer dialogue encouraged me to experiment without fear of failure.” (Male, Mardan)

“Professional conversations with other teachers gave me confidence to try new approaches.” (Female, Malakand)

“Reflecting together helped us solve problems we face in girls’ schools.” (Female, Malakand)

“Dialogue created a safe space to discuss our weaknesses.” (Female, Malakand)

“Talking with peers about student misconceptions helped me adjust my teaching methods effectively.” (Male, Mardan)

“Collaborating on lesson planning made me realize new strategies I had not considered before.” (Female, Malakand)

“Discussion with colleagues encouraged me to integrate more practical examples in lessons.” (Male, Mardan)

“Sharing challenges and successes with peers motivated me to try innovative approaches in class.” (Female, Malakand)

Mentoring and Observation

“Mentorship from senior teachers guided me through challenging situations.” (Female, Malakand)

“Collaborative lesson planning made me feel supported and encouraged innovation.” (Female, Malakand)

“Observing a colleague’s class gave me new ideas I could apply.” (Male, Mardan)

“Feedback from peers helped me improve my lesson planning.” (Male, Mardan)

“Mentors helped me reflect on mistakes and turn them into learning opportunities.” (Female, Malakand)

“Observing different teaching styles broadened my understanding of effective classroom management.” (Male, Mardan)

“Mentorship sessions helped me experiment with interactive teaching techniques safely.” (Female, Malakand)

“Watching peers handle difficult students gave me strategies to manage my own class.” (Male, Mardan)

“Mentor guidance helped me develop confidence to implement project-based learning activities.” (Female, Malakand)

“Observation and mentoring made me realize the value of flexible teaching approaches.” (Male, Mardan)

Experiential and Reflective Practice

“Reflective teaching helped me connect lessons with students’ real-life experiences.” (Male, Mardan)

“Collaborative reflection encouraged me to try new strategies without fear of failure.” (Female, Malakand)

“Experimenting with group work helped me learn what works best for my students.” (Male, Mardan)

“Reflective journals allowed me to track improvements and adjust teaching methods.” (Female, Malakand)

“Trying new approaches and reflecting on outcomes improved my confidence in teaching.” (Male, Mardan)

“Experiential learning activities showed me students’ hidden talents I had not noticed before.” (Female, Malakand)

“Reflection helped me balance content delivery with interactive engagement.” (Male, Mardan)

“Documenting my reflections encouraged me to rethink ineffective methods.” (Female, Malakand)

“Engaging in hands-on teaching experiments strengthened my understanding of student learning styles.” (Male, Mardan)

“Reflective practice made me more adaptive and creative in lesson planning.” (Female, Malakand)

RQ3: How does transformative learning influence teachers’ professional development?

Transformative Action

“I shifted from lecture-based teaching to group discussions, which improved student participation.” (Male, Mardan)

“Now I focus on students’ understanding rather than exam pressure.” (Male, Mardan)

“Transformative learning helped me see myself as a facilitator, not just an instructor.” (Female, Malakand)

“I now design lessons that connect with students’ experiences, which increased engagement.” (Female, Malakand)

“I started using problem-solving activities that challenged students’ thinking.” (Male, Mardan)

“I integrated storytelling and examples from daily life, which improved students’ comprehension.” (Female, Malakand)

“I redesigned assessments to focus on understanding rather than memorization.” (Male, Mardan)

“I actively involve students in setting learning goals, which changed classroom dynamics.” (Female, Malakand)

“I encourage students to reflect on their learning, which strengthens their independent thinking.” (Male, Mardan)

“Project-based activities replaced traditional lectures, making learning more meaningful.” (Female, Malakand)

Professional Agency and Confidence

“This change increased my confidence as a professional teacher.” (Male, Mardan)

“I feel empowered to experiment with new teaching methods.” (Male, Mardan)

“Seeing even small improvements in students motivated me to keep innovating.” (Male, Mardan)

“I feel more motivated and professionally empowered.” (Female, Malakand)

“Implementing new strategies boosted my professional self-esteem.” (Female, Malakand)

“I feel capable of handling diverse classroom challenges with innovative approaches.” (Male, Mardan)

“Transformative learning encouraged me to take initiative in curriculum planning.” (Female, Malakand)

“I am confident in sharing my teaching ideas with peers and mentors.” (Male, Mardan)

“Professional growth through reflection made me more autonomous in decision-making.” (Female, Malakand)

“I now see myself as a change agent, not just a teacher delivering content.” (Male, Mardan)

Classroom Management and Learner Engagement

“Transformative learning helped me manage large classes more effectively.” (Male, Mardan)

“Encouraging girls to ask questions in class built their confidence and made teaching more interactive.” (Female, Malakand)

“Reflective practices strengthened my problem-solving skills in classroom management.” (Female, Malakand)

“Even without resources, changing my mindset improved classroom learning.” (Male, Mardan)

“I now use seating arrangements and group tasks to manage classroom behavior efficiently.” (Male, Mardan)

“Interactive activities helped students stay engaged and reduced disruptions.” (Female, Malakand)

“Classroom management improved as I involved students in rule-setting and decision-making.” (Male, Mardan)

“I noticed that active student participation increases learning outcomes.” (Female, Malakand)

“Reflective practice allowed me to identify and address classroom challenges proactively.” (Male, Mardan)

“Student-centered approaches fostered better engagement and reduced monotony in lessons.” (Female, Malakand)

Table 1: Themes, Sub-Themes, and Sample Quotes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Sample Quotes
Critical Reflection	Questioning traditional practices; Awareness of student needs; Adaptation to student needs	“Completing the syllabus was my priority, but reflection showed me that students were memorizing without understanding.”
Dialogue and Collaboration	Peer discussion; Mentoring; Collaborative problem-solving	“Reflecting together helped us solve problems we face in girls’ schools.”
Transformative Action	Learner-centered strategies; connecting lessons to real life; Changed teacher role	“I shifted from lecture-based teaching to group discussions, which improved student participation.”
Professional Agency and Confidence	Autonomy; Willingness to innovate	“I feel empowered to experiment with new teaching methods.”
Classroom Management and Learner Engagement	Managing large classes; Active student participation	“Transformative learning helped me manage large classes more effectively.”
Experiential and Reflective Practice	Observation; Experimentation; Reflection	“Observing a colleague’s class gave me new ideas I could apply.”

Conclusion

Transformative learning provides a powerful framework for understanding teacher professional development in KP government secondary schools. Critical reflection, peer collaboration, mentoring, experiential learning, and learner-centered strategies enable teachers to shift from teacher-centered, exam-focused instruction to engaging, participatory, and student-focused classrooms. Teachers reported enhanced professional confidence, classroom management skills, and agency. Reflective and collaborative practices were crucial for sustaining change despite resource limitations.

Recommendations

1. Integrate transformative learning into professional development programs to encourage reflective thinking and learner-centered pedagogy.
2. Foster collaborative school cultures through peer mentoring, dialogue, and joint problem-solving.
3. Provide structural support, including time for reflection, professional networks, and recognition for innovative teaching.
4. Encourage classroom experimentation and reflective practice for continual professional growth.

Future Research

Conduct longitudinal research to examine the impact of transformative learning on student outcomes and teacher development.

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