

What Is a Reflective Teacher Allowed to Question? Authorized Reflexivity and the Professional Reach of Doubt in China, Japan, and the United States

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Abstract

Reflection is now a routine expectation of teacher professionalism, but professional standards do not make every part of schooling equally available for scrutiny. This article compares nationally authoritative or nationally influential teacher standards in China, Japan, and the United States to examine what is described here as authorized reflexivity: the institutionally sanctioned reach of professional judgment. The comparison is functional rather than legal-formal. Clauses are coded for the object of scrutiny, the action authorized toward that object, and the professional location in which the action appears. Reflection is most explicit when directed toward practice, professional learning, and learner evidence. Institution-facing agency is also visible in all three systems, but it is organized differently. Chinese standards authorize inquiry, innovation, collaboration, and curriculum development while treating the standards themselves primarily as governing frames. Japanese guidance makes curriculum and school improvement legitimate objects of evaluation and collective work, often within nationally and managerially articulated parameters. InTASC includes the most explicit policy-facing provisions—research, advocacy, and system change—but locates them under leadership and collaboration rather than reflective practice. The comparison therefore shifts attention from whether reflection is present to how standards distribute different objects, actions, and professional locations of judgment. It also suggests a wider comparative proposition: a professional ideal can circulate internationally without carrying the same jurisdiction of professional judgment into every system.

Keywords: China-Japan-United States, comparative education, policy analysis, reflective practice, reflexivity, teacher standards, teacher professionalism, teacher agency

Introduction

Reflection has become one of the least controversial virtues of contemporary teacher professionalism. Across teacher education, professional development, certification, and standards regimes, the reflective practitioner is routinely presented as a teacher who learns from experience, evaluates the consequences of practice, and adjusts professional judgment in response to evidence. This image draws on a long intellectual lineage. Dewey (1933) treated reflective thought as disciplined consideration of beliefs and knowledge claims; Schön (1983) later located professional knowledge in practitioners' capacity to reflect in and on action. In teacher education, reflection has subsequently become common currency, to the point that its desirability is often assumed rather than argued (Griffiths, 2000; Glasswell & Ryan, 2017).

Yet the normalization of reflection creates a problem that has received less comparative attention. A professional standard can require teachers to reflect extensively without granting equal legitimacy to all possible objects of reflection. Teachers may be expected to scrutinize their planning, instructional choices, biases, assessment practices, or effects on learners while institutional rules, curricular mandates, accountability arrangements, organizational priorities, or the standards themselves occupy a different status. These institutional features may appear as the conditions within which reflection occurs rather than as objects that reflection may legitimately render problematic. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether teachers are reflective. It is how far professional doubt is allowed to travel.

Professional standards matter here because they do more than list competencies. They name the kinds of attention and judgment that count as professionally responsible. A competent teacher is thereby positioned not only as someone who can act, but as someone expected to notice certain problems, accept responsibility for some of them, and treat particular domains as open to improvement. Work on professionalism has shown how such subject positions are shaped through competing discourses of autonomy, accountability, managerialism, and democratic participation (Sachs, 2001). The teacher-agency literature makes a related point from another direction: agency is achieved within cultural, structural, and material conditions rather than carried intact by an individual teacher (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). What remains less visible in both conversations is the distribution of professional judgment across different objects of schooling.

Existing scholarship has already established an important part of this critique. Ryan and Bourke (2013), examining teacher standards in Australia and the United Kingdom, argued that the reflexive professional remains an excluded or marginalized discourse. Glasswell and Ryan (2017), comparing professional standards across several national systems, similarly identified a tension between standards that mandate critical reflection and standards as regulatory texts: teachers are encouraged to examine practice, but much less often to interrogate the broader sociopolitical conditions of schooling. The present study does not claim to discover that tension anew. Instead, it asks a narrower comparative question that prior work leaves underdeveloped: how is the authority to make different parts of schooling questionable distributed within professional standards?

This study develops the concept of authorized reflexivity to examine this distribution. Authorized reflexivity refers to the institutionally sanctioned scope within which teachers may render aspects of schooling problematic, evaluate their premises, and pursue change. The concept directs attention to three linked dimensions: the object of scrutiny, the action authorized toward that object, and the professional location in which such scrutiny is housed. A teacher may, for example, be authorized to reflect on personal practice, evaluate student evidence, improve a school process, participate in governance, research policy, or advocate for system change. These are not equivalent forms of reflexive authority. Participation in an institution is not the same as evaluating it; improving an institution is not the same as questioning its premises; and system change framed as leadership may occupy a different professional location from reflection framed as self-development.

This framework is used to compare nationally authoritative or nationally influential teacher-professional standards in China, Japan, and the United States. The three cases are not formally equivalent legal instruments. China's Ministry of Education issued national professional standards for kindergarten, primary, and middle-school teachers in 2012. Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) provides a national guideline for locally developed indicators of teachers'

qualifications and abilities, most recently revised in March 2026. The United States lacks a federal teacher standard; the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers function instead as a nationally influential professional framework, supplemented in the analysis by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Rather than treating these documents as legally identical, the analysis compares the professional work they perform: each specifies what teachers should know, attend to, improve, and take responsibility for.

The comparison reveals a common pattern beneath substantial institutional variation. In all three systems, reflection is strongly authorized when its object is the teacher's own practice or the learning of students. Institution-facing agency also exists in all three cases, which means the contrast is not between systems that permit agency and systems that prohibit it. The difference lies in how more distant objects—curriculum, school organization, policy, and system arrangements—are positioned and what forms of action are attached to them. As professional attention moves outward, reflective and self-evaluative language is increasingly supplemented or replaced by the language of participation, improvement, leadership, research, advocacy, and change. The central comparative issue is therefore not the presence of reflection but the relationship among its object, its authorized action, and its professional location.

The question is also becoming more consequential as teacher standards are rewritten for emerging forms of professional work. New global competency frameworks already ask teachers to exercise judgment in domains such as artificial intelligence, ethics, human agency, and technology-mediated professional learning (Miao & Cukurova, 2024), while policy discussions increasingly ask education systems to reconsider which competencies will matter in rapidly changing technological environments (OECD, 2025). Such developments do not require a separate theory of technological change for the present study. They sharpen the comparative problem examined here: whenever a new competency enters the professional vocabulary, its significance depends not only on whether teachers are expected to possess it, but on what that competency authorizes them to examine, evaluate, redesign, or challenge. The future of reflective professionalism may therefore turn as much on the jurisdiction attached to new competencies as on the competencies themselves.

The contribution of the comparison lies in the relation it makes visible. Existing studies have shown that standards can celebrate reflection while narrowing reflexivity; the present analysis asks how that narrowing is organized. Across three differently governed systems, it traces which objects become available for scrutiny, what teachers are authorized to do toward them, and where those actions are located professionally. That relation—object, action, and professional location—also offers a practical strategy for multilingual comparison because it does not depend on treating reflection, and related terms as lexical equivalents. The broader claim is comparative rather than universal: a professional ideal can circulate widely without carrying an identical jurisdiction of judgment. What travels as a familiar language of professionalism may be reorganized quite differently once it enters national standards architectures.

The analysis begins by distinguishing reflective practice from reflexivity and by asking what is lost when reflection is institutionalized as a professional requirement. It then develops authorized reflexivity as a way to compare the three standards regimes and uses the resulting object–action–location relation to organize the empirical analysis and discussion.

From Reflective Practice to Authorized Reflexivity

Reflection as professional virtue

The modern language of reflective teaching combines at least two traditions that are often folded together in policy. One treats reflection as disciplined inquiry into experience: practitioners examine evidence, reconsider assumptions, and improve future action. Another treats reflexivity more expansively as attention to the conditions, positions, relations, and structures through which professional action becomes possible and meaningful. The distinction is analytically important because a teacher can be intensely reflective about technique while remaining non-reflexive about the institutional conditions that define the available choices.

Dewey's account of reflective thought emphasized inquiry, evidence, and judgment rather than routine acceptance of belief (Dewey, 1933). Schön's account of the reflective practitioner challenged technical rationality by showing that professionals confront indeterminate situations through forms of knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action that cannot be reduced to the application of formal rules (Schön, 1983). These traditions gave teacher education a language for professional judgment that resisted purely procedural conceptions of teaching. However, as reflection became institutionalized in teacher education and standards, its critical promise was not necessarily preserved intact. What begins as a challenge to technical rationality can itself become a mandated professional routine.

This tension is central to Glasswell and Ryan's (2017) analysis of reflective practice in professional standards. Their comparison of national standards showed that reflection is widely required but typically directed toward the improvement of teaching and learning rather than toward the wider sociopolitical organization of schooling. Ryan and Bourke (2013) sharpen the point by distinguishing reflection from reflexivity: the latter requires attention to the discursive and structural conditions shaping practice, yet this dimension is often marginalized in standards discourse. Their work establishes that regulatory texts can simultaneously celebrate reflective professionalism and limit the range of what becomes available for reflexive scrutiny.

For comparative education, however, the more useful next step is to move beyond the general claim that standards constrain reflexivity. That claim is already well established. The unresolved question is how this organization of reflexivity varies across differently governed professional systems. If institutional critique is not simply absent, where does it go? Under what professional vocabulary does it become legitimate? Are teachers asked to improve institutions, evaluate them, question them, or advocate for their alteration? And when institutional change is authorized, is that authorization integrated into reflective professionalism or separated into other categories such as leadership, collaboration, research, or advocacy? These questions move the analysis from the quantity of reflection to the distribution of reflexive authority.

Teacher agency is necessary but not sufficient

The teacher-agency literature provides an important bridge because it shifts attention away from individual capacity toward the conditions under which professional action is achieved. Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson's ecological approach conceptualizes agency as something achieved through the interaction of actors with temporal, cultural, structural, and material contexts rather than as a stable possession of the individual teacher (Priestley et al., 2015). This matters for standards analysis because a text may describe teachers as active, innovative, collaborative, or even change-oriented without necessarily authorizing them to treat institutional premises as objects of judgment.

Agency and reflexivity therefore overlap but should not be collapsed. A teacher may possess considerable room to innovate within an accepted curriculum, participate actively in school management, or lead improvement initiatives while the goals, rules, or policy assumptions organizing those activities remain largely non-questionable within the professional text. Conversely, a standard may explicitly invite policy research or advocacy even while locating those activities outside its definition of reflective practice. The analytic problem is thus not whether teachers are agents, but what kinds of objects their agency is authorized to act upon and with what degree of problematization.

This distinction also protects the comparison from a crude autonomy hierarchy. The three systems examined here differ substantially in governance, legal structure, and professional regulation. Ranking them as more or less autonomous would flatten those differences and exceed what policy texts can establish. Authorized reflexivity instead asks a narrower question that can be answered textually: how do standards position self, learners, curriculum, school organization, and policy as objects of professional attention, and what actions do they attach to each object?

Authorized reflexivity

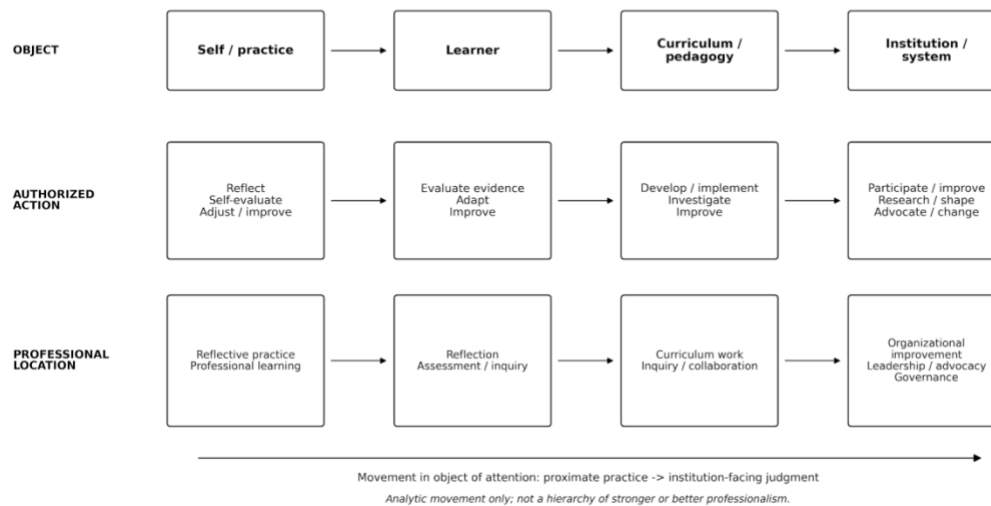
Professional regulation is therefore used as a sensitizing background rather than as a predetermined explanatory theory. The analytical focus remains closer to the text: which objects are made professionally questionable, which verbs are attached to those objects, and in which professional domain does the questioning occur? From this perspective, standards operate as architectures of problematizing authority. They define not only desirable conduct but the legitimate reach of professional doubt.

Authorized reflexivity names this reach of professional judgment. The claim is not that reflection has objects; reflective-practice scholarship has long distinguished what practitioners reflect upon, how they reflect, and to what end. The analytical move is to follow the relation among three things that standards often separate. One is the object made available for scrutiny—practice, learner evidence, curriculum, school organization, or policy. Another is the action attached to that object: adjustment, evaluation, reframing, participation, research, advocacy, or change. The third is where that action is housed professionally, whether under reflective practice, inquiry, collaboration, leadership, advocacy, or governance. Once these relations are kept together, clauses that look equally “agentic” no longer appear equivalent. Participation in school improvement, evaluation of school goals, alignment with system priorities, and research on those priorities place the teacher in quite different relations to the institution.

This framework is deliberately modest in its claims. It does not infer what teachers actually think, whether they feel constrained, or whether they resist policy in practice. Nor does the absence of a clause demonstrate the absence of real-world agency. The object of analysis is the professional subject position made available by standards: what these texts explicitly normalize as legitimate professional attention and action. That bounded claim is important because it allows comparison without turning policy language into an account of national teacher behavior.

Figure 1. Authorized Reflexivity: Object-Action-Location Model

Analytic model for tracing how professional judgment changes as the object of attention moves outward



Note. Arrows indicate analytic movement in the object and professional location of judgment, not a normative hierarchy.

Comparative leverage

The value of comparing China, Japan, and the United States lies not in treating them as representative civilizational types but in the different institutional arrangements through which teacher professionalism is standardized. China provides a centrally issued national professional standard whose language of reflection has remained formally stable since 2012. Japan combines national guidance with locally developed competency indicators and a more recent policy architecture of continuous professional learning, dialogue, and school-based organizational improvement. The United States offers a decentralized governance context in which nationally influential professional standards coexist with state regulation and profession-led certification frameworks.

These differences create comparative leverage because similar professional ideals—reflection, improvement, learning, responsibility—are embedded in different governance arrangements. If similar asymmetries in the object of reflection emerge despite those differences, the comparison can illuminate a broader feature of standards-based professionalism. If the asymmetries differ, the contrast can show how professional doubt is redistributed through different vocabularies of governance. Either outcome advances the analysis beyond a country-by-country description.

The comparative question guiding the study is therefore: How do nationally authoritative or nationally influential teacher-professional standards in China, Japan, and the United States distribute authorized reflexivity across the objects, actions, and professional locations of teacher judgment?

Two subsidiary questions follow. First, when professional attention moves outward from self and student learning toward curriculum, school organization, and policy, how does the authorized action change from

improvement to evaluation, questioning, or system change? Second, when institution-facing agency is present, is it integrated into reflective professionalism or relocated into other categories such as organizational improvement, leadership, research, or advocacy?

These questions position the study to make a comparative rather than merely documentary contribution. The aim is not to identify which system gives teachers more freedom. It is to explain how different standards regimes organize the professional legitimacy of doubt.

Comparative Design and Method

Comparative rationale

This study uses comparative qualitative policy analysis to examine how teacher-professional standards construct the legitimate scope of professional reflection and institution-facing action. The comparison is functional rather than legal-formal. The selected documents do not occupy identical positions within the three education systems: China has centrally issued national professional standards; Japan has a national guideline that structures locally developed competency indicators; and the United States has no federal teacher standard, but nationally influential professional frameworks developed through interstate and profession-led organizations. Treating these instruments as equivalent laws would therefore be misleading. They are comparable for a narrower reason: each publicly specifies valued forms of teacher knowledge, judgment, professional learning, responsibility, and action, and thereby contributes to the construction of an expected professional teacher.

The cases were selected to create variation in the governance of teacher professionalism while holding constant the presence of explicit professional standards discourse. China represents a centrally issued national standards regime. Japan combines national steering with locally operationalized indicators and school-based professional development. The United States represents a decentralized system in which national influence is exercised through interstate standards and voluntary professional certification rather than a federal professional standard. The purpose of the comparison is not to treat the three countries as cultural types or to rank their teachers by autonomy. It is to examine whether similar professional ideals, especially reflection and continuous improvement, are attached to different objects and different kinds of authorized action across contrasting governance arrangements. Table 1 summarizes the corpus, institutional status, and functional basis of comparison.

Table 1. Corpus and Functional Comparability

System	Core document(s)	Issuing authority	Status / analytic role	Why functionally comparable
China	Professional Standards for Primary and Middle School Teachers (Trial), 2012	Ministry of Education	Centrally issued national professional standards	Specify expected teacher knowledge, judgment, practice, development, and evaluation
Japan	National guideline for teacher competency indicators (rev. 2026) + common competency framework (2022)	MEXT	National guidance structuring locally developed indicators	Specify nationally expected competencies while delegating local operationalization
United States	InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards + NBPTS Five Core Propositions (supplementary)	CCSSO / NBPTS	Nationally influential interstate and profession-led frameworks	Specify valued teacher knowledge, judgment, professional learning, leadership, and action

Corpus construction

The core Chinese corpus consists of the Ministry of Education's 2012 Professional Standards for Kindergarten, Primary, and Middle School Teachers (Trial) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2012), with the primary- and middle-school standards forming the principal analytic texts because their provisions are structurally parallel and explicitly include reflection and development. Official explanatory materials are used to clarify the intended function of the standards but are distinguished from the standards themselves during coding.

For Japan, the core corpus is the current MEXT national guideline governing the formulation of indicators for improving the qualifications and abilities of public-school teachers, using the version most recently revised in March 2026 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2026), together with the nationally specified common competency framework (MEXT, 2022) and closely related official guidance concerning training records, professional dialogue, and school-based learning. Because Japanese national policy delegates the construction of specific indicators to appointing authorities, these documents are analyzed as a national framework for professional expectation rather than as a single uniform teacher standard.

For the United States, the principal corpus is the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2011), particularly Standards 9 and 10 concerning professional learning, ethical practice, leadership, and collaboration. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards' Five Core Propositions (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS], 2016) and relevant reflective-practice materials are used as a profession-led supplementary corpus. These texts are nationally influential rather than federally binding. Their inclusion allows the U.S. case to capture both interstate standards discourse and a prominent profession-led formulation of accomplished teaching.

Document inclusion was guided by function rather than by the occurrence of the word reflection alone. The corpus included clauses that authorized or required teachers to reflect, evaluate, review, inquire, research, improve, participate, lead, advocate, challenge, or otherwise exercise professional judgment toward teaching, students, curriculum, school organization, policy, or professional systems. This broader semantic strategy reduces the risk of treating non-equivalent vocabulary across Chinese, Japanese, and English as evidence of substantive absence.

Analytic procedure

The unit of analysis is the smallest meaningful policy clause, competency descriptor, or performance indicator that links a professional actor to an object of attention and an authorized action. Analysis proceeds in two stages. The first stage is within-case coding. Each relevant clause is coded for three dimensions developed iteratively from the literature and corpus.

The first dimension is object: (1) self and teaching practice, (2) student learning and development, (3) curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, or educational programs, and (4) institution and system, including school goals, organizational routines, governance, policy, mandated curriculum, and professional standards. The second dimension is authorized action, distinguishing improvement or adjustment, evaluation, questioning or reframing, and advocacy or formal change. Alignment language is coded separately where professional judgment is explicitly tethered to laws, curricular frameworks, school missions, system priorities, or administrator-defined expectations. The third dimension is professional location: reflection or professional learning, inquiry or research, collaboration, organizational participation, leadership, advocacy, or governance.

The second stage is cross-case comparison. Rather than counting keywords, the analysis compares patterned relationships among objects, actions, and professional locations. Particular attention is given to what happens as the object of professional attention moves outward from the teacher's own practice toward curriculum, school organization, and policy. Negative cases are retained deliberately: explicit policy research and system-change provisions in the U.S. corpus prevent a simple claim that standards exclude institutional agency, while Chinese provisions on inquiry and innovation and Japanese provisions on school improvement complicate any compliance/autonomy binary. Because the Chinese primary- and middle-school standards contain several structurally parallel provisions, a sensitivity check was also conducted in which near-identical cross-level clauses were collapsed into unique functional provisions. The cross-case pattern remained substantively unchanged, indicating that the main contrasts were not an artifact of repeated template language within the Chinese standards.

After the coding rules stabilized, all count-eligible clauses were reread against the code definitions and adjacent textual context. The main visualizations use unique functional provisions rather than raw clause totals: 12 for China (16 raw clauses before collapsing four near-identical primary/middle-school parallels), 14 for Japan, and 18 for the United States. Clauses can receive more than one object or action code, so percentages are descriptive and are not expected to sum to 100. As a single-author analysis, the study does not report an intercoder reliability coefficient. Analytic rigor instead rests on an explicit coding scheme, retention of original-language wording, boundary-case memos, systematic negative-case searches, a second-pass recoding audit, and the sensitivity analysis described above.

Cross-language interpretation

The analysis does not assume that reflection and reflexivity are lexical equivalents. Original-language wording is retained in the evidence matrix, and English translations are treated as analytic translations rather than substitutes for the source term. Coding therefore follows the function of a clause in context: what object is being made available for professional attention, what action is attached to it, and toward

what stated purpose. Where a term can plausibly support more than one code, the clause is retained as a boundary case and interpreted in relation to adjacent provisions rather than forced into a single category.

Limits of inference

This is a study of policy discourse, not teacher behavior. The analysis identifies professional subject positions made available by standards; it does not establish what teachers actually believe, whether they experience the standards as constraining, or how policy is enacted in particular schools. Likewise, textual silence is not treated as legal prohibition or proof of absent agency. Absence becomes analytically meaningful only when read alongside the objects and actions that are explicitly named and through systematic comparison with negative cases. This bounded approach allows the study to examine the distribution of professional legitimacy without overextending policy language into claims about national teaching cultures.

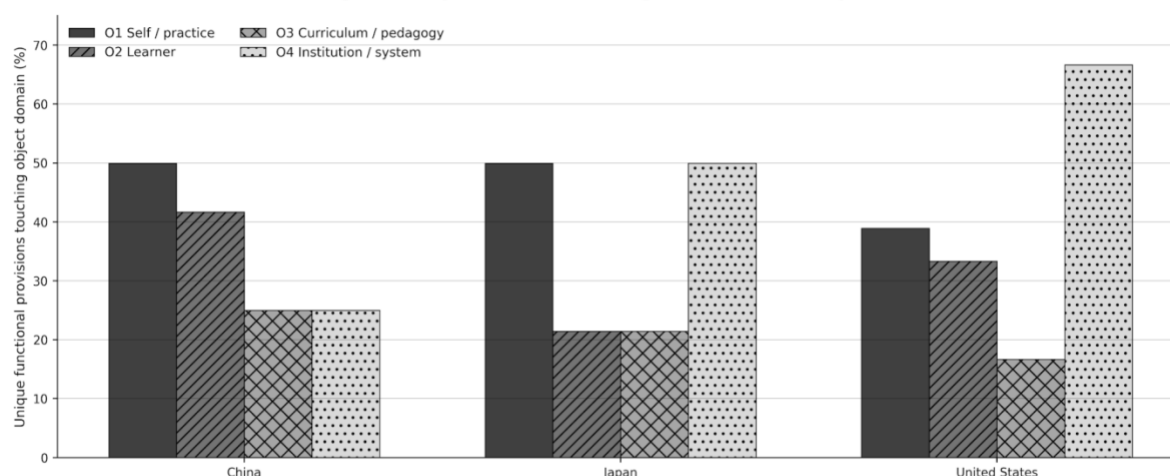
Results

Reflection is concentrated on practice and learner evidence

The three corpora contain abundant professional judgment, but explicit reflective language remains most closely tied to the teacher's own practice, professional learning, and evidence concerning learners. In the Chinese standards, teachers are repeatedly asked to evaluate the effects of teaching, use assessment information to adjust educational work, collect and analyze information, reflect, investigate practical problems, and improve practice (MOE, 2012). The Japanese framework similarly asks teachers to review their own learning histories, strengths and weaknesses, revisit educational practice, and use learner data to improve learning (MEXT, 2022, 2026). In the U.S. corpus, InTASC Standard 9 makes the connection particularly visible: teachers evaluate practice, examine the effects of their decisions on learners, reflect on personal biases, and use self-assessment to plan professional growth (CCSSO, 2011). The National Board formulation reinforces this practice-facing meaning by defining accomplished teachers as professionals who think systematically about practice and learn from experience (NBPTS, 2016).

The descriptive object counts help clarify what this pattern does—and does not—mean. After collapsing near-identical Chinese primary- and middle-school provisions, the analysis contains 12 unique functional provisions for China, 14 for Japan, and 18 for the United States. Half of the Chinese provisions touch self/practice and 42% touch learners; in Japan, self/practice appears in 50% and learners in 21%; in the United States, the corresponding figures are 39% and 33%. Because provisions can receive more than one object code, these percentages do not sum to 100. More importantly, they are not measures of how reflective a national system is. They show where professional attention is textually attached. Figure 2 makes this distribution visible.

Figure 2. Object-Domain Coverage in the Coded Corpus



Provisions may receive multiple object codes; within-country percentages therefore need not sum to 100%.

Unique functional provisions: China N=12; Japan N=14; United States N=18.

Note. Percentages are based on unique functional provisions; provisions may receive multiple object codes, and Chinese primary/middle-school parallels are collapsed for the main visualization.

Institution-facing agency is common, but institutional objects have different textual statuses

The same counts also rule out a simple institutional-boundary thesis. Institution/system is touched by 25% of the unique Chinese provisions, 50% of the Japanese provisions, and 67% of the U.S. provisions. In other words, institutional objects are not absent from these standards. What differs is what teachers are positioned to do when those objects appear.

Table 2. Comparative Evidence Matrix

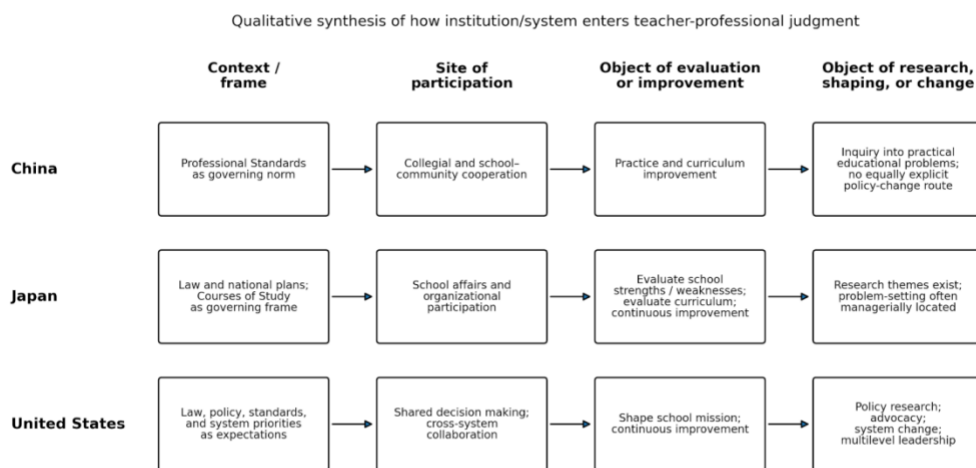
Object domain	China	Japan	United States
Self / practice	Reflect, self-evaluate, investigate, improve. Reflection remains strongly practice-facing.	Review and reconceptualize practice; review learning history, strengths, weaknesses, role.	Evaluate practice, reflect on bias, use self-assessment and evidence for professional growth.
Learner	Observe and evaluate learner progress; use assessment results to guide and improve teaching.	Use learner data; interpret individual characteristics, needs, adjustment, and growth.	Monitor learning, evaluate outcomes, adapt instruction and planning to learner needs.
Curriculum / pedagogy	Develop curriculum resources; investigate educational problems; innovate within teaching work.	Evaluate and improve curriculum; conduct lesson study and materials research within national curricular frames.	Create and evaluate learning experiences and plans within curriculum goals and content standards.
Institution / system	Collaborate, support school-community relations, improve practice; standard/policy appear mainly as governing frames.	Participate in school management, evaluate school strengths/weaknesses, improve organization; policy remains a strong frame.	Participate and lead; research policy, shape school mission, advocate, and enact system change.

China provides a useful first contrast. The standards authorize inquiry into practical educational problems, innovation in teaching, curriculum-resource development, collegial collaboration, and school–community work. These provisions make a compliance-only reading untenable. Yet institutional and policy arrangements enter the text mainly as governing or coordinating frames. The Professional Standards themselves are defined as a basic norm for educational activity and as an important basis for teacher preparation, entry, training, and evaluation. By contrast, the problems explicitly opened to teacher inquiry are framed primarily as needs and problems arising within educational and teaching work (MOE, 2012). The point is not that institutional critique is prohibited. The narrower textual finding is that outward-facing agency is visible, while the governing framework is not comparably named as an object teachers are expected to research, question, or alter.

The Japanese materials place the institution in a somewhat different position. Teachers are expected to participate in school affairs, contribute to continuous organizational improvement, understand school strengths and weaknesses, collaborate on educational problems, and evaluate and improve curriculum (MEXT, 2022). Institution-facing judgment is therefore more than simple implementation. At the same time, these activities remain embedded in articulated school-management and curricular frames, and the 2026 national guideline explicitly requires professional development to take account of laws, the Basic Plan for Education, and the Courses of Study (MEXT, 2026). School and curriculum can become objects of evaluation and improvement without necessarily becoming objects whose governing premises are themselves opened to teacher-led problematization.

The U.S. corpus contains the clearest policy-facing counterexample. InTASC Standard 10 authorizes teachers to generate research on educational issues and policies, advocate for learners, shape and support the school mission, enact system change, and assume leadership at school, district, state, and national levels (CCSSO, 2011). Yet these provisions are not housed in Standard 9, where reflection, self-assessment, and professional growth are concentrated. They appear under Leadership and Collaboration. This internal separation matters because the same broad institutional domain changes textual status across the framework: policy may be something to understand, a source used to improve practice, an object of research, or a target of advocacy and change.

Figure 3. Institutional Object-Status Across the Three Standards Regimes



Columns denote analytically distinct textual statuses, not a developmental sequence or country ranking.

A standards regime may authorize more than one status simultaneously; negative cases remain visible in the synthesis.

Note. The columns represent distinct textual statuses of institution/system, not a developmental scale or country ranking.

The action repertoire changes as the object moves outward

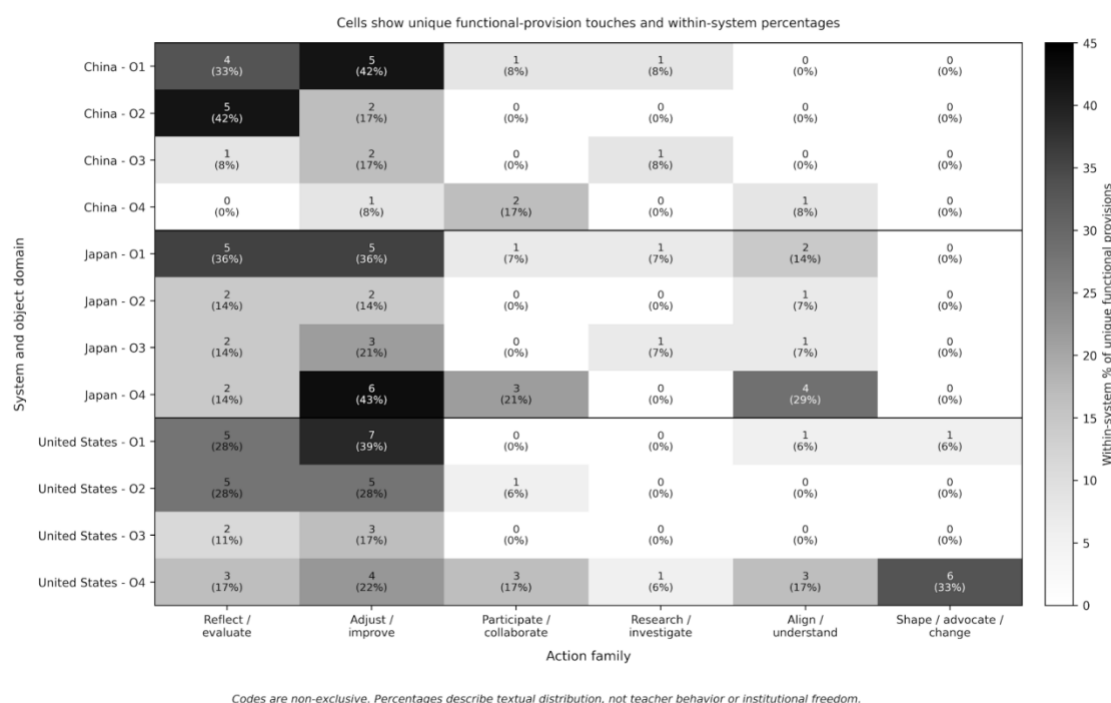
Figure 4 makes the relational pattern more visible than object frequency alone. Practice- and learner-facing provisions across the three systems are dominated by reflection, evaluation, adjustment, and improvement. Curriculum introduces a somewhat different repertoire: development, design, implementation, inquiry, evaluation, and improvement. Institution/system provisions are more heterogeneous. They include collaboration and organizational improvement in all three corpora, alignment and understanding in Japan and the United States, and a distinctive cluster of shaping, advocacy, and change in the U.S. material.

That last contrast is especially useful because it is difficult to explain as a difference in the mere presence of agency. Among the unique U.S. provisions, six institution/system touches—33% of the U.S. provision set—fall into the shape/advocate/change family. No equivalent action-family touches appear in the coded Chinese or Japanese O4 provisions. This does not establish that Chinese or Japanese teachers lack real-world capacity to contest policy, nor does it make U.S. professionalism more advanced. It shows that the nationally influential U.S. framework gives policy-facing change an explicit professional vocabulary that the selected Chinese and Japanese national texts do not use in the same way. Conversely, Japanese O4 provisions are strongly concentrated in improvement and alignment, while Chinese O4 provisions concentrate more heavily in collaboration, participation, improvement, and governing-frame relations. The comparison is therefore about the organization of legitimate action, not a scalar amount of autonomy.

A second pattern concerns professional location. Institution-facing judgment often migrates away from the textual spaces where reflection itself is named. The U.S. case is the most explicit because policy research and system change sit under Leadership and Collaboration rather than Professional Learning and Ethical Practice. In Japan, school-level problems and research themes are frequently organized through

collaborative improvement and school-management structures; some agenda-setting is explicitly associated with school leadership. In China, inquiry and innovation are present but remain closely tethered to educational and teaching work, collegial learning, and improvement. Across the cases, then, movement in the object of attention is accompanied not only by a change in verbs but often by a change in the professional category through which the action becomes legitimate.

Figure 4. Object x Action Distribution by System



Note. Cell values report touches among unique functional provisions; codes are non-exclusive and are not measures of national autonomy or reflexivity.

Authorized reflexivity is a distribution, not a boundary

Taken together, the results do not support the claim that reflective professionalism simply stops once teachers encounter institutional objects. The boundary is less clean than that. Schools, curricula, policies, and professional systems appear throughout the corpora, sometimes quite prominently. What changes is their object-status: an institutional feature may function as a governing frame, a site of participation, an object of evaluation and improvement, an object of research, or a target of shaping and change. Those statuses are associated with different verbs and different professional locations.

This is the empirical basis for authorized reflexivity. The concept is not intended to measure how much freedom teachers possess, and the figures should not be read as rankings of the three systems. Its analytic value lies in making visible a relation that frequency alone obscures: what is rendered questionable, what professional action is attached to it, and where that action is housed. The same outward object can therefore be highly visible in two standards regimes while carrying a very different repertoire of legitimate professional judgment.

Discussion

The findings refine rather than overturn earlier critiques of standards-based professionalism. Ryan and Bourke (2013) and Glasswell and Ryan (2017) showed that professional standards can celebrate reflection while marginalizing reflexivity. The present comparison adds a different question: when institution-facing judgment does appear, how is it organized? The answer is not well captured by a simple contrast between reflective and non-reflective systems, or between agentic and compliant teachers. All three corpora authorize forms of initiative beyond the individual classroom. What differs is the relation between the object being addressed, the action made legitimate toward it, and the professional location in which that action is named.

This is why teacher agency, although necessary to the analysis, is not sufficient as the main explanatory category. A teacher may innovate, collaborate, evaluate curriculum, or participate in school improvement while treating the surrounding policy framework as a condition of action rather than as an object of scrutiny. Conversely, a standard may authorize policy research or system change while locating those activities under leadership rather than reflection. In both cases the teacher is agentic, but the jurisdiction of judgment is different. Authorized reflexivity therefore adds a relational question to agency: agency toward what, by means of which action, and under which professional role?

Professional location matters for the same reason. InTASC makes this especially visible because reflection and self-assessment are concentrated in Standard 9, while policy research, advocacy, and system change appear in Standard 10 under Leadership and Collaboration. The distinction is not merely editorial. It shows that an outward movement in the object of attention can be accompanied by a relocation of professional authority. Japan organizes institution-facing judgment differently, largely through curriculum management, collaborative improvement, and school organization. The Chinese standards likewise authorize inquiry, innovation, and collaboration, but attach them closely to educational and teaching work. Across the cases, then, professional judgment does not simply expand or contract. It is redistributed among different objects, verbs, and professional locations.

That redistribution also clarifies why shared professional vocabulary is a weak indicator of shared professional meaning. Reflection travels easily across systems. So do improvement, collaboration, responsibility, and professional learning. Yet the comparison shows that the same vocabulary can coexist with different arrangements of problematizing authority. The global diffusion of a professional ideal therefore need not produce convergence in the jurisdiction attached to that ideal. Comparative analysis becomes more revealing when it asks not only whether a concept is present, but what it permits professionals to treat as questionable, what actions follow from that questioning, and where those actions are institutionally housed.

Contribution to global comparative education

This point has broader significance for comparative education because policy convergence is often easiest to see at the level of labels. Professional ideas move through international organizations, national reforms, certification systems, and teacher-education discourse, but their institutional meanings are not carried intact. The object–action–location relation offers one way to study that transformation without assuming lexical equivalence or reducing national differences to cultural types. It is especially useful in multilingual comparison, where reflection, and related terms cannot be treated as direct substitutes for one another. The comparative unit becomes the professional work performed by the text rather than the isolated word.

The same question is likely to become more important as teacher standards absorb new domains of professional work. UNESCO's AI Competency Framework for Teachers, for example, is explicitly intended as a global reference for national competency development and places human-centred agency, ethics, AI pedagogy, and professional learning within a new professional vocabulary (Miao & Cukurova, 2024). Whether such competencies enlarge teachers' jurisdiction of judgment cannot be assumed from their presence. AI may be framed as a tool to use, a system to evaluate, an institutional arrangement to redesign, or an infrastructure whose assumptions remain outside ordinary professional scrutiny. Future comparative work can trace these possibilities across national adaptations, successive revisions of standards, and local enactment.

This future agenda also suggests a way to connect textual analysis with studies of practice. The present study identifies forms of judgment that standards make professionally recognizable; it does not establish how teachers enact, ignore, reinterpret, or contest them. Longitudinal work could examine whether authorized reflexivity expands, contracts, or moves into different professional locations as standards change. Enactment studies could then ask when textual authorization becomes practical authority and when institutional conditions interrupt that translation. Such work would test whether the object–action–location relation identified here travels beyond the three cases without assuming that it will reproduce the same pattern.

The corpus captures nationally authoritative or nationally influential professional texts rather than the full regulatory environment of each country. Local indicators in Japan, state-level standards in the United States, and implementation practices in China may extend or complicate the patterns identified here. The documents also differ in form and density, which is why the visualized counts are treated as descriptive supports rather than as measures of national prevalence or professional autonomy. Collapsing near-identical Chinese primary- and middle-school provisions did not alter the substantive cross-case pattern, but that sensitivity check addresses only one form of asymmetry. Finally, textual authorization is not enacted agency. The argument concerns how selected standards make particular objects and forms of professional scrutiny legitimate in text, not the full range of what teachers think or do.

Conclusion

Reflection has become sufficiently ordinary in teacher professionalism that its presence alone tells comparatively little. The three standards regimes examined here all expect teachers to exercise judgment, learn from evidence, and improve practice. The more consequential differences emerge when the object of judgment moves beyond the teacher and learner. Curriculum, school organization, policy, and professional standards do not enter the texts in the same way, nor are they coupled with the same actions or professional roles. Authorized reflexivity names that distribution without converting it into a ranking of systems.

The larger comparative implication is that professional ideas do not travel as intact packages of meaning. A shared term such as reflection can circulate globally while its jurisdiction is reorganized locally—toward different objects, verbs, and institutional locations. That proposition matters for established standards and for newer competency frameworks now entering national systems. Future comparative work can therefore ask not only which professional ideas move across borders, but what kinds of judgment become possible once they arrive. In that sense, the enduring question is less whether teachers are told to reflect than what a profession is permitted to make questionable.

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