

# Beyond the Procedure: How Structured Reflection Fosters Ethical Awakening and Justice-Oriented Practice in Special Education Assessment

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study investigates how structured practicum reflections transform aspiring Texas educational diagnosticians. Thematic analysis of weekly journal entries revealed concurrent growth in specialized expertise and ethical identity, which in turn advanced collaborative communication and the adoption of culturally responsive practice. Critically, participants moved from procedural compliance toward an ethical awakening, a shift triggered by “disorienting dilemmas” such as high-stakes Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings. This awakening fostered advocacy that extends beyond technical assessment, positioning diagnosticians as equity-oriented agents. The transition aligns with Maxine Greene’s (1995) concept of social imagination—the capacity to envision the world “as if it could be otherwise”. Structured reflective journaling provided the scaffold for this development, guiding candidates from descriptive narration to critical self-assessment and imaginative problem-solving. Journal excerpts illustrate the cultivation of social imagination: candidates imagine strengths-based evaluations and student-centered ARD processes, thereby challenging entrenched inequities and opening possibilities for more just practice. By embedding structured reflection in the practicum, the study demonstrates a concrete pathway for preparing diagnosticians to enact transformative, justice-oriented assessment.*

Keywords: *reflective practice, transformative education, social imagination, educational diagnosticians*

In a rapidly changing educational landscape, the role of the educational diagnostician demands more than specialized psychometric competency; it calls for imagination, advocacy, and a commitment to building transformative pathways for every learner (Greene, 1995). As schools face growing diversity of student demographics, complex special education needs, shifting policy mandates, and heightened calls for equity, diagnosticians are increasingly positioned not only as assessors but as potential agents of systemic change (Artiles et al., 2005; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). However, traditional training models often emphasize procedural compliance over reflective inquiry, preparing diagnosticians to navigate paperwork and timelines rather than to reimagine educational possibilities for historically marginalized students (Ysseldyke & Bolt, 2011).

Practicum experiences provide emerging diagnosticians with critical opportunities to connect theory with practice, offering a rare space where reflection can bridge the gap between procedural demands and deeper educational purposes (Schön, 1987; Rodgers, 2002; Guo, 2022). Within these real-world contexts, future diagnosticians can either

replicate existing systems or begin to challenge them. The difference often lies in the ability to reflect meaningfully and to imagine alternative futures (Greene, 1995). Rather than viewing the practicum as a procedural exercise to fulfill certification requirements, emerging diagnosticians must embrace it as an entry point into transformative action, where reflection becomes the first step toward reshaping practices and structures (Schön, 1987).

This study explores how structured practicum reflections foster a transformative vision of education among educational diagnostician candidates. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to examine the evolving professional perspectives of graduate students as they complete their field experiences. Thematic analysis of candidate reflections revealed three core movements: a shift from procedural focus to ethical awakening, the enactment of advocacy beyond compliance, and the cultivation of social imagination as a professional skill.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How does structured practicum reflection foster the development of a transformative professional identity and ethical awareness among educational diagnostician candidates?
- In what ways do candidates leverage these reflective insights to move beyond procedural compliance and enact advocacy for students and families?
- How is Greene's concept of social imagination utilized in candidate reflections to envision and propose equitable alternatives to current diagnostic practices?

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### *Beyond Psychometric Assessment: Exploring Social Imagination as a Framework for Diagnostic Advocacy*

At the heart of transformative education is the belief that learning must empower individuals to imagine alternative futures and act toward creating them. For educational diagnosticians, this transformation begins when practitioners move beyond psychometric assessment to view students as complex individuals situated within diverse educational realities (Artiles et al., 2005; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016; UNESCO, 2021). The present study contributes to this growing body of literature by investigating the mechanisms of professional growth, specifically focusing on how reflective practice can be intentionally leveraged to cultivate an advocacy-oriented identity. This literature review first examines the critical shift in the diagnostician's role, then explores how reflective practice facilitates this necessary shift, and finally establishes social imagination as the necessary theoretical lens for evaluating transformative outcomes.

The impetus for this research stems directly from the thematic findings of this study, which identified critical moments of ethical awakening and the cultivation of an advocate's mindset among candidates. These findings suggest that the traditional focus on procedural adherence is insufficient, and that a structured approach is required to nurture a deeper, ethically grounded professionalism (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). Moving beyond compliance requires exposing future diagnosticians to the systemic inequities inherent in current practice and providing tools for them to critically process these

experiences. This initial step of ethical confrontation forms the foundation for professional transformation.

To facilitate this crucial shift, the study utilized structured reflective journaling during the practicum experience. Reflective practice, dating back to Dewey (1933) and refined by Schön (1987), is central to turning unstructured experience into genuine professional learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). Specifically in special education, intentional reflection helps candidates interrogate the "why" and "for whom" of their actions, moving them beyond the technical procedures of "how to score this test" to the critical question of "what are the ethical consequences of this diagnosis?" (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Alt & Raichel, 2020). The journal thus served as the crucible where observation of inequity became internalized professional critique.

Finally, to frame and analyze the resulting movement from critique to action, this study utilizes Maxine Greene's (1995) concept of social imagination as its primary theoretical framework. This concept centers on the human capacity to look critically at present circumstances and, through conscious effort, perceive "what might be" in place of "what is." The framework is uniquely suited to capture the desired transformative outcome: the diagnostician's ability to envision and propose equitable alternatives to institutional practices that often fail marginalized students (Egan, 2005). The subsequent sections detail the existing literature supporting this trajectory, from the evolving professional role to the critical importance of imagination in advancing equity.

## Methods

### *Research Design and Ethics*

This practitioner-based qualitative study employed a thematic analysis of student journal reflections to explore evolving professional perspectives during a practicum experience. This study received Exempt approval from the Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) IRB-2025-26 prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, acknowledging their participation was voluntary; their choice to participate or withdraw would not impact their

course grade, and their data would be anonymized using pseudonyms.

### ***Participants and Recruitment***

Participants were students enrolled in an Educational Diagnostician certification program at Texas A&M International University. They were recruited via a voluntary email invitation distributed by the course instructor (the author) during their practicum hours. The diagnostician certification requires all students to complete a total of 160 supervised field hours over the course of their practicum. Eighteen (18) students agreed to participate and comprised the study's final sample. All participants were certified teachers with an average of five years of classroom experience. They completed their field placements across diverse school settings, including urban, suburban, and rural districts.

### ***Data Collection***

The primary source of data was weekly reflective journals, required as part of the practicum coursework. To ensure the reflections were aligned with the study's focus on transformative learning and advocacy (Mezirow, 1990; Greene, 1995), a structured, three-part prompt was implemented. This structure was designed to guide candidates from descriptive narration toward critical self-assessment and imaginative problem-solving. Consistent with Moon's (2006) work on learning journals, these reflections served not only as evidence of growth but also as a method of fostering it.

Students are asked to submit weekly journals over the extent of their practicum. The journals were collected at the 55-hour, 110-hour, and 160-hour marks to capture distinct phases of the students' learning process. Data used for this study were anonymized prior to analysis and treated not as static artifacts, but as dynamic records of professional growth.

The required weekly prompt guided students through critical self-reflection on their field experiences. Candidates were asked to document a specific event, analyze the procedural requirements and ethical dilemmas inherent in that event, and then propose imaginative solutions or alternative practices rooted in advocacy and justice.

### ***Data Analysis***

A thematic analysis approach was used to examine the journals, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The researcher was the sole coder. The researcher engaged in multiple phases of analysis, beginning with deep immersion in the data. Initial codes were generated based on recurring ideas related to advocacy, imagination, systemic barriers, and professional identity. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher maintained a detailed audit trail and reflexivity journal to document all coding and analytical decisions, and utilized member checking by sharing emergent themes with two participants to verify alignment between the interpretation and their original intent. Codes were then organized into broader themes representing key aspects of transformative learning. Throughout the analysis, special attention was paid to how candidates moved beyond procedural compliance toward reflective, imaginative, and transformation-driven conceptions of diagnostic practice. To protect student confidentiality, journal excerpts are cited anonymously using pseudonyms.

### ***Findings***

The analysis revealed three core themes demonstrating the transformative impact of structured reflection on diagnostician candidates' professional identity and practice.

#### ***Theme 1: Reflection as Awakening***

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the practicum journals was the power of structured reflection to awaken students to the depth, complexity, and humanity embedded within the diagnostic process. This theme captures the epistemological shift from viewing the diagnostician's role as primarily a function of procedural adherence to understanding it as an inherently ethical and relational endeavor. Early journal entries often focused on logistics: timelines, eligibility paperwork, and technical accuracy. However, as students continued to utilize the critical and imaginative components of the weekly prompts, many began to write less about procedural steps and more about the emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions of their practice. Reflection thus became the essential lens through which they reexamined their purpose, shifting from

a compliance-driven mindset to a values-driven professional perspective.

For many candidates, this awakening was triggered by direct exposure to what Mezirow (1990) terms as a disorienting dilemma—a situation where deeply held assumptions are challenged by real-world complexity. These moments of cognitive dissonance frequently occurred in high-stakes environments, such as Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings, where the administrative reality of special education directly confronted the human reality of a student's life. It was here that the limitations of a purely procedural focus became undeniable. As Karla articulated following a difficult meeting, her perspective fundamentally changed: “I realized the ARD is not just about paperwork. It’s about students who need a voice. The mom didn’t understand what we were saying, and I could feel how anxious she was. That changed how I think about everything.”

Karla's insight underscores the transition from a procedural focus to an awareness of relational ethics (Noddings, 2013). Her reflection shifted from judging the adherence to protocol to recognizing the emotional and linguistic gap between the system and the family. Similarly, Josie noted how her initial reflections, which prioritized system management, were swiftly replaced by an understanding of the individual cost of those priorities: “I caught myself focusing too much on due dates and timelines. Then I met Miguel, a kid who had been overlooked, and I knew I had to rethink my priorities.” The ethical confrontation presented by an overlooked student required Josie to restructure her professional priorities, placing student dignity above bureaucratic deadlines.

For all participants, these moments marked a crucial turning point in their professional identity formation. The journals reveal a movement away from an external locus of control (where the system dictates action) to an internal locus of control (where professional values dictate advocacy). The deeper meaning of the work consistently emerged when candidates stopped trying to “get it right” (procedurally) and started asking, “What does this mean for the student and their future?” (ethically and imaginatively). This final shift validates the effectiveness of structured reflection in cultivating the ethically grounded,

transformative professional identity required of contemporary educational diagnosticians.

### ***Theme 2: Advocacy Beyond Compliance***

As students deepened their engagement with the diagnostic process, another strong theme emerged: the shift from procedural compliance to personal and professional advocacy. This theme directly addresses Research Question 2 by detailing how candidates utilized their reflective insights to move into active, context-specific advocacy for students and families. Initially, many candidates entered their practicum experiences with a somewhat limited understanding of their role, focusing primarily on accurate testing, meeting deadlines, and following district guidelines. However, through their fieldwork and structured reflection, students began to reimagine themselves not as technicians of assessment but as agents of social justice and systemic accountability (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016).

This transition demonstrates the development of social justice literacy—the awareness that professional responsibility extends beyond mere adherence to rules to encompass challenging systemic inequities (Artiles et al., 2005). Several journal entries highlighted critical moments of this realization. For example, Isabel reflected, “These experiences catalyzed profound introspection on my own assumptions and reminded me that diagnosticians must always approach assessments with critical awareness of systemic inequities and student context.” Building on this understanding of context, Lauren, reflecting on a mishandled case, wrote, “Even though I wasn’t at fault, I had to take responsibility and fix it for the family. That was a turning point for me,” demonstrating a commitment to ethical accountability over simply avoiding blame.

Crucially, this advocacy was often focused on culturally and linguistically responsive assessment (CLRA), mirroring contemporary calls for equitable practice (Artiles et al., 2005). Michael shared his experience working with bilingual learners and acknowledged the need to “affirm the student’s strengths, culture, and voice” while ensuring accuracy and fairness in testing. David, after completing a culturally responsive assessment, noted, “We must look at who the test was made for and how our students experience it. It’s not just about scoring—it’s about whether the test

respects who they are.” These reflections demonstrate a critical awareness of test bias and the necessity of interpreting data within the student’s full linguistic and cultural context, a necessary step in reducing disproportionality.

The necessity of direct advocacy for family empowerment and clarity also stood out. Kylie reflected on an ARD meeting where a parent was misinformed about services: “I couldn’t sit there and stay quiet. I asked the educational diagnostician if we could clarify things, because the mom thought her child would be placed in a separate classroom forever. I realized advocacy doesn’t mean arguing; it means making sure everyone understands what’s really happening.” These narratives reveal the tension between the bureaucratic structure of special education and the ethical call to advocate for students and families, demonstrating a professional commitment to challenging ambiguity and ensuring true informed consent.

### **Theme 3: Imagination as a Professional Skill**

A third and compelling theme that emerged from students’ reflections was the growing recognition of imagination as an essential professional capacity—the direct operationalization of Maxine Greene’s (1995) concept of social imagination. While traditionally associated with creativity or abstract thinking, imagination in this context referred to the ability to critique the status quo, envision alternatives to current practices, and propose solutions that serve students more holistically (Egan, 2005). Through their practicum experiences, students began to understand that imagination was not optional or indulgent but fundamental to building more equitable and human-centered assessment processes.

The power of “imagining otherwise” often manifested as a direct rejection of prevailing deficit-based models in special education. Nina, for example, wrote about conducting an evaluation for a bilingual student who had been previously misidentified: “What if evaluations were also strengths-based, not just deficits?” she reflected. “I imagined a report that celebrated what the student could do instead of focusing on all the things they couldn’t. That changed how I wrote my recommendations.” This moment represents a crucial imaginative leap from system-centered reporting to asset-based professional practice,

demonstrating an active resistance to labeling that is central to achieving equity (Valencia, 2010).

Similarly, Araceli’s reflections highlighted the imaginative capacity to center student voice and empowerment. She envisioned what it would look like if ARD meetings were led to more like student-centered conferences: “I thought, what if we asked students to share something about themselves before we talked about testing data? That would shift the tone of everything.” This reflects a critical, imaginative response to the often intimidating and procedural nature of the ARD meeting, proposing a more dignified and humanizing interaction (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016) that empowers the student rather than simply processing them.

These insights demonstrate that imagination consistently emerged in direct response to moments of discomfort or limitation. When timelines conflicted with ethical decision-making, or when rigid documentation overshadowed student voice, the candidates responded with innovative thinking. The act of “imagining otherwise” helped them resist the temptation to normalize systemic barriers and instead consider alternatives rooted in empathy and justice, proving that the professional skill of social imagination is the necessary prerequisite for transformative diagnostic practice (Greene, 1995; Egan, 2005).

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study demonstrate that structured reflection within the practicum setting can serve as a powerful catalyst for transformative education among future educational diagnosticians, directly addressing the three research questions. Rather than reinforcing technical compliance alone, the practicum became a space where students engaged deeply with the ethical, relational, and imaginative aspects of their role. This shift reflects the power of experiential learning to foster not only professional skill but also the development of new identities centered around advocacy, empathy, and visionary thinking.

### ***Responding to RQ1 (Shifting Identity and Ethical Awareness)***

The emergence of Theme 1: Reflection as Awakening illustrates a meaningful shift in professional identity, moving candidates from surface-level procedural focus to deep ethical awareness. As the literature suggests, reflection is most impactful when it prompts learners to question assumptions, feel discomfort, and reframe professional purpose (Dunne et al., 2024; Macías Torres, 2024). The student reflections captured this process in action, revealing how real-world encounters led to deeper ethical engagement with their role. This dynamic echoes the work of Yost, Senter, and Forlenza-Bailey (2000), who contend that critical reflection is a foundational process for preparing educators capable of navigating ambiguity and exercising ethical judgment.

### ***Responding to RQ2 (Advocacy Beyond Compliance)***

The second theme, Advocacy Beyond Compliance, underscored the importance of professional agency in the diagnostic process. Students came to see advocacy not as an abstract ideal but as a daily responsibility, particularly in navigating broken systems, unclear communication, and emotionally charged ARD meetings. This finding supports broader calls in the field for diagnosticians to act as equity-oriented practitioners who challenge systemic barriers and prioritize student dignity. Their progression aligns with what Macías Torres (2024) described as the reflective educator's capacity to recognize and act upon their professional agency.

### ***Responding to RQ3 (Social Imagination and Equitable Practice)***

The third theme, Imagination as a Professional Skill, reinforces the critical need for vision in educational diagnostics. Drawing from Greene's (1995) notion of imagination as the ability to envision "what might be," students used their reflections to question outdated practices and imagine more just and responsive alternatives. As Elliott (2023) notes, imagination is central to social justice work, not as escapism but as the foundation for change. In this study, imagination emerged not through instruction but through lived experience, reflection, and a growing sense of professional responsibility. Egan (2005) supports this, arguing that imagination is a fundamental component of meaningful learning, allowing educators to connect with students in ways that transcend rote procedures.

Taken together, these themes suggest that practicum-based reflection provides a unique space for diagnosticians-in-training to develop the dispositions required for transformative practice. It is not enough to teach the technical components of the role; programs must also create intentional opportunities for critical reflection, dialogue, and imaginative visioning.

### ***Recommendations for Practice***

The findings from this study point to several actionable recommendations for educator preparation programs aiming to cultivate transformative educational diagnosticians.

First, reflection should be intentionally embedded throughout the practicum experience, not just as an assignment but as a structured learning process. Weekly reflective journaling, supported by guiding prompts and timely instructor feedback, can help students move beyond surface-level descriptions and toward deeper insight. These reflections should explicitly encourage candidates to explore not only what they did, but what they questioned, imagined, or re-envisioned in their practice.

Second, diagnostic training should elevate advocacy as a core professional competency. Coursework and practicum debriefs can include case studies that explore systemic barriers, ethical dilemmas, and scenarios requiring professional judgment beyond policy compliance. Programs should position diagnosticians not only as assessors, but as collaborators, communicators, and equity-minded decision-makers. Additionally, incorporating structured collaboration within diagnostician preparation programs can deepen reflective practice and strengthen candidates' ability to navigate complex educational landscapes with empathy and skill (Secomb, 2008).

Third, imagination should be treated as a vital dimension of diagnostic work. Faculty can encourage students to consider "what could be" by using design-thinking protocols, visioning activities, or reflective discussions that ask candidates to rethink traditional processes. Highlighting strengths-based language, student voice, and culturally responsive assessment strategies can foster more creative and humanizing approaches.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates how the intentional integration of structured reflection within the practicum setting serves as a powerful catalyst for unlocking the transformative capacity of aspiring educational diagnosticians. The qualitative analysis of candidate journals revealed a crucial professional trajectory, documenting the evolution of participants from focusing narrowly on procedural compliance to embracing a deeply ethical and imaginative stance toward their work. The core shift observed—from system manager to ethical advocate—is the central finding and contribution of this work.

The evidence presented supports the critical role of the practicum as a site of transformative learning, where candidates face disorienting dilemmas that compel them to reframe their professional identity. Specifically, the findings affirm the relevance of Greene's (1995) social imagination as a necessary professional disposition. It is not sufficient for diagnosticians to merely reflect on what is wrong; they must possess the ability to envision and propose equitable alternatives to systemic inequities, whether by creating strengths-based narratives for evaluations or facilitating more student- and family-centered ARD meetings. This study provides empirical support for the value of cultivating this imaginative capacity in special education professional preparation.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

While this study offers compelling insights, it is subject to several limitations inherent in its design. First, the data relies on self-reported journal entries, which, while offering deep insight into internal thought processes, are inherently subjective and may be influenced by self-presentation bias. Second, the study utilized a small, localized sample of participants from a single university program in Texas, limiting the generalizability of the findings to diagnostician candidates in other geographical or institutional contexts. Furthermore, the researcher's role as the course instructor required careful attention to reflexivity and analytical rigor,

which was addressed through the documentation of an audit trail and member checking with participants.

To build upon these findings, future research should explore a number of avenues. A longitudinal study tracking these candidates into their first year of professional practice would be valuable to determine if the shifts in ethical awareness and social imagination documented here are sustained and translated into actual changes in institutional practice. Comparative studies could also examine the impact of different forms of reflective prompts (e.g., critical incident vs. visionary prompts) on the development of advocacy skills. Finally, research using observation and artifact analysis (such as final evaluation reports or ARD meeting minutes) could provide objective evidence of how a diagnostician's transformative mindset influences measurable practice outcomes.

### ***Final Statement***

Ultimately, the preparation of educational diagnosticians must move beyond a narrow focus on psychometric competence to prioritize the development of ethical advocates who are equipped to challenge systemic inequities. When preparation programs intentionally cultivate critical reflection and social imagination, they are better positioned to graduate professionals ready to reform special education—one student, one family, and one thoughtful decision at a time. The commitment to releasing the imagination in educational diagnostics is a commitment to a more equitable future for all learners.

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