

Early Years Practice

For Educators & Teachers

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Chapter 1

The Reflective Early Years Professional

Chapter overview

The importance of reflection, reflective learning and practice for practitioners, educators and teachers is considered within a framework of continuing professional learning and developing early years practice for young children and families. An early years workforce of professionals who are reflective, impacts on the quality of provision and practice for children's learning and development. Theories on reflection, the process of reflection and the concept of a reflective practitioner are explored. Approaches to engaging in reflective practice and developing self-reflective awareness as part of continuing professional learning and growth for change in practice are discussed. There is opportunity for reflective thinking about professional practice.



Continuous professional reflective learning

The importance of continuous professional reflective learning for those working with children and families has been recognized as a contributory factor in developing competent practitioners, educators and teachers. In Tickell's (2011) review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), a curriculum for babies and young children from birth to 5 years of age, the important contribution of an experienced, well-trained and supported workforce for children's learning and developmental outcomes was identified. The review encouraged those working with babies and young children to engage in reflective practice by considering the effectiveness of their practice within the curriculum framework of the EYFS.

There is a generally held expectation that an individual will be committed to continuing their professional development throughout their career (Bubb and Earley, 2007). Bubb and Earley argue that continuing professional development (CPD) enables practitioners, educators and teachers to consider their everyday practice in light of related theory, to reflect on, review and modify their practice accordingly, enhancing individuals' specialized knowledge and skills, and to grow personally and professionally in self-confidence and self-knowledge.

The term 'continuing professional development', which refers to continuing education and training, is commonly used within educational contexts. Swim and Isik-Ercan (2013: 182), in using the term 'continuous professional *learning*', identify that when professional development is continuous and ongoing with a specific focus on daily practices, those working with children and families will benefit more. Practitioners develop professional dispositions entwined with their daily practices through continuous professional learning (Swim and Isik-Ercan, 2013). These dispositions are shaped through analysis, reflection and documentation within the socio-cultural context of the settings, schools and children's centres in which they work. Through experience of working with children and families, and continuous and reflective professional learning, professionals develop from their initial training as a novice, emerging as an expert and specialist in early years practice; as someone who is competent and capable, critically reflective, collaborative, a researcher and enquirer, independent and autonomous, and who becomes an early years specialist and leader of practice.

In considering the qualities and attributes of a specialist early years workforce, Moss (2011) envisages an early years workforce with professional qualities of ethical and value-based reflective practice. Being reflective and being a reflective practitioner concern qualities and attributes in a person's behaviour – part of the professional way an early years practitioner works (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). Moss (2008: 125) conceptualizes an early childhood workforce of 'democratic reflective practitioners'; practitioners, educators and teachers who are critical thinkers, researchers, co-constructors of meaning, with identity and values, who value

participation, diversity and dialogue; rather than childcare technicians who carry out routine tasks without due consideration of professional practice. Reflective practice helps to develop professionals who are democratic and reflective.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is a vital aspect of working with young children. There is an increasing expectation for those working in the early years sector to reflect on their practice in order to enhance their professional development and to improve and change practice (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). Reflective practice is a way to consider how we work with young children, families and other professionals, construct the notion of childhood, respond to children's voices, and develop and respond to new professional and inter-professional relationships (Moss and Petrie, 2002). How we engage reflectively with the evolving early years landscape of government policy helps shape early childhood services, provision and practice for children and families.

Government reviews of early years practice (2010–2013) examined the impact of poverty on children's development (Field review, 2010); the contribution of early intervention to closing the educational gap in children's outcomes (Allen review, 2011); multi-agency provision for safeguarding and protecting children (Munro, 2010); the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (EYFS) as a framework for children's learning and assessment (Tickell, 2011); early years education and childcare qualifications (Nutbrown, 2012); and the provision of flexible and affordable childcare (Truss, 2013). Due to these changes within the early years sector, reflective practice in settings, children's centres and schools is becoming more embedded as a key expectation for those involved in working with young children and families (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). Professionals with reflective abilities are central to implementing policy in practice; this is being able to consider, reflect on and think about existing practice. What is effective? What is not so effective? Being able to review, modify and develop practice within a landscape of policy and change, with a framework of principles and values of practice in the care and education of babies and young children, is essential. How can I improve or change practice to benefit children? Informed and reflective practitioners are engaged in continuous improvement in practice and in translating government policy initiatives into day-to-day practice with children and families (Hevey and Miller, 2000).

Pollard et al. (2002) explain that the process of reflection within a framework of reflective practice should include:

- a focus on goals
- evidence from practice
- being open-minded and inclusive

- regular dialogue with colleagues
- reflection in context
- an awareness of when to change and when to keep existing practice.

Reflection involves purposefully thinking about an experience with the goal of gaining new insights, ideas and understandings (Schon, 1987). As a critical reflector of practice, this process of thinking and learning can be unnerving – to unpick practice then reconstruct it in a differing form can be destabilizing, yet enlightening for professional learning and reflective practice. Reflective practitioners routinely use their reflective insights, ideas and understandings to recognize similarities between their experiences and the new or unique problems they encounter and to inform their actions in new situations, as this early years educator's story of practice shows.

Story of practice: a reflective educator

Marietta is an early years educator working in a toddler room in a daycare setting. Here, she reflects on her recent appraisal with her manager who described her as being reflective, and on how this helped change her practice. Marietta considered how she had done this and realized that the following three questions helped with her reflective thinking and change in practice when she reviewed the snack-time routine:

- What is happening?
- How is it happening?
- What can change?

What is happening?

Marietta observed that some children did not stay for very long at an activity, sometimes not long enough to fully complete it.

How is it happening?

Adults were interrupting children's concentration, by taking children away from their activity for the snack.

What can change?

A change in snack time from a fixed routine to a flexible routine, where children can go to the snack area when they are ready, would help children engage in their activity learning in a sustained way. The change in routine would make snack time more child-centred, the routine fitting around the child, rather than the child fitting into the routine.



Questions for reflection: reflecting on practice

Think about how you could learn from practice and make an improvement. This may be an aspect of your practice or an aspect of practice you have observed. Use the three questions from the above story of practice as prompts for reflection:

- What is happening?
- How is it happening?
- What can change?

The early years educator in the story of practice above, used questions to critically reflect on her practice. Critical reflection is essential for professional learning experiences to impact on practice (Lehrer, 2013). A reflexive process of learning and development empowers professionals to identify their own problems and solutions as reflective practitioners. In Lehrer's research in Quebec, Canada (2013), participants described empowerment as feeling confident, competent and comfortable professionally, as well as being autonomous and engaged in the reflective process, through the identification of their own problems, needs and solutions, using theoretical and experiential knowledge and developing the desire to learn.

Theoretical approaches

Several theoretical approaches explain the relationship between experience, reflection and learning (Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983). Kolb's (1984) model of the experimental learning cycle demonstrates his theory that people learn from their experience through the process of:

- *reflection* on the things we do (concrete experiences)
- *experimentation* (action) in similar situations at another time, to gain further experience
- *reflection* again, and so on ...

This cyclical process of reflection allows practitioners, educators and teachers to learn from experience (Harrison, 2008). Being reflective and being a reflective practitioner refer to a long-term characteristic of a person's behaviour rather than a cognitive activity – a process of seeing and being (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). Reflection is part of the cycle of interpretation and response; this is at the centre of professional action in complex situations (Schon, 1983), which can instigate change in the professional self and in practice.

Schon (1983, 1987) furthers understanding of reflective practice with the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' through his theory of reflective practice. For students and adults to become reflective practitioners, educators and teachers, they should be reflective during and after their initial education and training. The two levels of reflection in Schon's theory of reflective practice are reflection-*in*-action and reflection-*on*-action. Reflection-*in*-action concerns adjustments made as adults work with children and families, thinking on their feet (Turley, 2009). Reflection-*on*-action requires more deep thinking; Turley (2009) describes it as a cognitive post-mortem that occurs after an experience when we stop and consider what has happened. What role did I play? What feelings occurred? What might I learn from it? Both levels of reflection might occur after a critical incident, an error, an observation, a difficult situation or an unexpected result. What can I learn from it? Both forms of reflection enable students and professionals to continually learn from their experiences.

Reflection indirectly shapes future action because it begins an internal dialogue of thinking and doing from which professionals learn to become more skilful (Schon, 1987). The notion of reflection-*for*-action extends Schon's theory (Killion and Todnem, 1991). Reflection-*for*-practice is a process through which novice and expert practitioners can begin to anticipate situations and mentally plan and prepare for situations before being faced with new or unforeseen events. It is not sufficient to reflect-*in*-practice and to reflect-*on*-practice, as to reflect-*for*-practice is crucial for professional development and the quality of provision and care (Turley, 2009). The following story of practice demonstrates Schon's theory of reflection.

Story of practice: reflective practice

The first child in this story is unreflective, routinely carrying out a daily task.

During an inspection in an infant school, the Ofsted inspector observed a boy carrying out his daily task of watering the plants in the classroom, which he did every day before he went home. The boy came to the last plant in the classroom, one that did not have any leaves or flowers on, looking remarkably like a stick in a pot:

'Why are you watering that?' asked the inspector.

'Cos I always do', answered the boy.

The second child in this story is reflective; she reflects-*in*-practice and makes adjustments during a routine daily task.

During an inspection in an infant school, the Ofsted inspector observed a girl carrying an egg box of cress seeds growing on cotton wool. The girl carried out her daily task of watering the cress seeds, which she did every day before she went home. The seeds were slowly growing, showing green shoots on top of the cotton wool. She came to the last compartment in the egg box. Looking closely at it, she didn't water it; putting her watering can down, she carefully took out some of the green cress shoots:

'Why aren't you watering the seeds in that compartment?' asked the inspector.

'Cos the seeds need space to grow first, and then I'll water them', answered the girl.

The children's class teacher learnt about these incidents in feedback from the inspector. She considers her response and reflects *on* her practice:

- What has she learnt about the daily routine of asking the children to water the plants in the classroom?
- Is it to save her time? Or do the children learn something by doing the task?
- Why didn't she observe the differences in the way the children watered the plants?
- What has she learnt about the two children?
- Are there other things happening around her in the classroom that she doesn't know about?
- How can she include this daily watering routine more in her classroom practice?
- Is there a need to change practice or is the practice all right as it is?

The following questions for reflection help you consider the level of reflection in your own reflective practice.



Questions for reflection: reflective practice

Identify an example of practice that shows reflection-*in*-practice or reflection-*on*-practice. This may be something you have done or observed a practitioner, educator, teacher or child doing. Write a short paragraph about it, and then share it with a colleague in a reflective conversation, as a form of reflection-*on*-practice,

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a focus for reflective thinking and learning. To frame your questions, use the following words as prompts:

- What?
- Why?
- How?
- Where?
- What if...?
- What would happen if...?

You may want to further your reflective conversation and engage in reflection-for-practice:

- What plans and preparation could be made for future practice?
- What strategy for future provision and practice could be made based on your reflective conversation?

Developing reflective practice

The challenge in developing reflective practice is finding the time and space to do it. The following are ways for those working with children and families to engage in reflective practice.

Conversation and dialogue

Providing an opportunity for staff to meet regularly for collaborative reflective dialogue establishes a learning culture in which critical reflection can take place (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). Pedagogues working in nurseries in the Reggio Emilia region in northern Italy, close the nursery for an afternoon each week, enabling them to meet and engage in reflective dialogue about children's learning.

Visits

The opportunity to visit another school, setting or children's centre to observe and consider practice with others provides reflective time and space for individuals to review provision and practice in light of the work of others. Teaching schools, as a

model for continuing professional learning, provide an opportunity for outstanding nurseries and schools to share practice with others (Pen Green, 2012).

Documentation

In Reggio Emilia nurseries, children's learning is recorded through documentation: a child's drawing, a sculpture constructed by a group of children, photographs of children working, playing, discovering, exploring. Pedagogues use this evidence as a focus for their reflective dialogue about each child's learning.

Journal writing

A journal is a reflective space for thinking, a powerful way of developing reflective practice. Keeping a reflective journal enables the writer to think more deeply about issues, and the writing becomes an internal dialogue (Tsang, 2007). Journal writing has enabled children's centre leaders to 'think through what to do next or to work out how things might be done better' (NCSL, 2008: 7). This personal space is a place where you can record information, write about issues, dilemmas and challenges, and explore feelings about and responses to situations. It may also contain information, cuttings from the internet, magazines and newspapers, annotated with reflective thoughts. The process of reflective writing enables professional learning and development (Bolton, 2014) to be an empowering tool for reflection. A reflective journal is unique to an individual. It is useful at times to look through your journal, as your personal and professional learning journey will be storied, and your progression can be reflected on.

Mentoring

The role of a mentor, who is a more experienced professional, contributes to the development of a less experienced professional's knowledge and understanding, skills and professional practice (Robins, 2006). The facilitative and supportive mentoring relationship between the mentor and mentee provides great potential for reflective practice (Ruch, 2007). New staff members joining a setting, children's centre or school require time to reflect on their practice, to link practice to their understanding of theory and to discuss this with more experienced practitioners. Settings, who do best in supporting new staff, designate an experienced practitioner as a mentor (Nutbrown, 2012).

Critical friends

A critical friend is a trusted and supportive colleague who provides regular and ongoing feedback on practice or study. A critical friend actively listens, questions

and challenges your knowledge and practice in a supportive and constructive way (Rawlings, 2008), 'encouraging the reflector to look beyond the superficial and think about their feelings and deeper learning' (Leeson, 2010: 188). Critical friends emerge through friendship and associated trusted relationships.

Study groups

Here, groups of students meet together to share their learning and support each other in their studies and reflective practice, significantly contributing to successful learning (Knight et al., 2006). Graduates of an Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree (EYSEFD) value the contribution of their study group of friends through their foundation degree and in further undergraduate study (Hallet, 2013). Study groups are formed through friendship, sustaining and supporting study and learning.

Communities of practice

Early years networks in which practitioners, educators, teachers and childminders meet to share and reflect on practice and research, provide space for reflective dialogue. The concept of a community of practice developed from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who identified the social learning process that takes place when people meet with a common interest, share ideas and practices, discuss issues and problem-solve, and develop shared understandings and new practices through reflective dialogue. A community of practice develops over time through participation, demonstrating that learning is not static but an emerging process of reflection for development, improvement and change in professional practice (Hallet, 2013).

A reflective learning environment

In a setting, children's centre, school, or in a study context such as a college or university, the head teacher, setting or centre leader or lecturer should establish a reflective learning environment through a climate of trust and respect, with reflection at the heart of learning. Helping staff or students to construct meaning about theory and practice, develop theory from practice, question practice, critique ideas from academic literature and research, enables the development of professional confidence to articulate knowledge, practice and reflections to others. A reflective and supportive learning environment contributes to personal and professional development (Hallet, 2013), in which there is time and space for critical reflection on theory, research and practice.

Self-reflective awareness

Reflection or mindful practice has been likened to a mirror (Moon, 2006). If you look into a mirror, the same image of yourself appears and is reflected back to the viewer. Many people remain trapped at that one window, looking out every day at the same scene, and do things in the same way. However, when you draw back from the window, turn, walk around and see all the different windows and ways of doing things that await your gaze, opportunities for doing things differently appear (Moon, 2006). Moon's metaphor of reflection as looking in a mirror, highlights the importance of the self in developing reflective practice. Reflection helps practitioners, educators and teachers to become more attuned to their sense of self and to understand how this self fits into a larger context that involves others; reflection helps to shape professional identity (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). Looking at your practice through different perspectives helps you become critically reflective. Brookfield (1995) describes these differing perspectives as four lenses: (1) your autobiographical lens, focusing on your emotional responses to your experiences; (2) the lens through which children and families using your provision view you; (3) the feedback lens used by your peers and colleagues and other professionals; and (4) the lens of theory and research (Whitehouse, 2014: 38). Feedback from others can be spoken or written down, and how you receive and respond to feedback can influence the positive or negative impact of feedback on the self. How can you use reflection for professional learning from feedback? In the following questions for reflection, the use of constructive feedback to aid the development of the professional self is considered.



Questions for reflection: using feedback

Consider some feedback you have received from a work colleague, a tutor or a lecturer. Write it down in a narrative to give the feedback some context:

- Make a list identifying *positive* aspects of the feedback.
- Make a list identifying *negative* aspects of the feedback.
- Make a *Feed Forward* list:
 - What have I learnt?
 - What will I modify or develop from my learning?
 - How will I develop my studies or my work with children and families?

To develop further self-awareness as a student or professional working with children, and to better understand your professional self, try the following activities.

SWOT analysis

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. It is a useful framework to audit your strengths and weaknesses; to identify opportunities to resolve weakness; to develop your strengths; and to reflect on what threats there are to prevent your development (Bedford and Wilson, 2013).



Questions for reflection: SWOT analysis and action planning

Using SWOT analysis, assess your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in your professional learning or practice:

- If you are a student, consider your professional learning on your course.
- If you work with children, consider your professional practice.

Action planning

This involves a process of review, target setting and planning. In the 'Weaknesses' section of your SWOT analysis, identify an area for development and work this into an individual action plan.

Review

- My area for development is ...
- What knowledge, skills and understanding do I need to develop?

Target setting

- What do I want to learn and achieve?
- How long will it take me? The target can be broken down into achievable steps: short-, medium- and long-term achievable goals.

Planning

- What resources do I need?
- Who can help me?
- Do I need any financial help?

Evaluation and review

- How will I know that I have achieved my target?
- How can outcomes be evaluated?

Critical incident analysis

Deepening reflection occurs through analysis of a critical incident, a new or unforeseen event happening, like an angry parent in the playground; analysis or unpacking of the incident leads to significant learning and knowledge. Critical analysis of the event is described by Dye (2011: 228) as ‘a light bulb moment’ of deeper insights. These deeper reflective insights provide productive reflection (Cressey and Boud, 2006) on the basis of what happened previously, and productive reflection leads to interventions in work activity that change provision and practice. The following questions for reflection help with critical reflective analysis of an event.



Questions for reflection: critical incident

- Identify an event you want to critically analyse; you may have been involved in the event or you may have observed it.
- Write a narrative describing what happened.
- What did you learn from the event – for example, about yourself, others (children, parents/carers, colleagues, students) and the environment?
- What will you do next time?
- How will you share your learning with others?

Reflective practice for change

Reflection or reflective practice is an agent for change within an organization and for an individual’s personal and professional learning and development, enabling them to review, modify and change their professional practice (Siraj and Hallet, 2014). The following questions for reflection help you to consider the influence of reflection on your professional learning and practice.



Questions for reflection: reflection and my practice

- Obtain a large piece of paper, pens, pencils and felt-tipped pens.
- Consider the question: What does reflection and reflective practice mean to me?

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- Illustrate your understanding on the paper provided; use drawings and words to represent a narrative about your thinking.
- Once completed, share and talk about your narrative with a friend, work colleague or study buddy.

Implications for practice

The creative reflective cycle could be thought of, like a breath, as a vital exchange of energy that goes on between the children and the adults, as breathing is a continuous cycle made up of a progression of stages. The in-breath is the observation: our reading of the environment and what is happening. The pause between the in- and out-breaths is the revisiting, analyzing and generating of possibilities. The out-breath is our response to the children and the environment of enquiry, our breathing life back into it. This is a continuous cycle that involves a reciprocal exchange between adults and the children.

Aguirre Jones and Elders (2009: 12) liken the process of reflection to breathing; it is part of our biology and way of living. To be reflective as an individual or as a collective group requires time and space within a busy working day. This has implications for practice – if reflection is considered within a framework of continuous professional learning and for developing practice, time and space for reflection within and away from the work context should be integrated into working practices.



Further reading

Level 4

Hallet, E. (2013) *The reflective early years practitioner*. London: Sage.
This book explores how work-based reflective learning and reflective practice support the development of reflective early years practitioners.

Level 5

Hughes, G. (2009) 'Talking to oneself: using autobiographical internal dialogue to critique everyday and professional practice', *Reflective Practice*, 10 (4) 451–63.

An interesting journal article, using a bag as a focus for reflection and critique; unpacking and reflecting on the contents of your own bag introduce the concept of critical reflection in a practical way.

Level 6

Bolton, G. (2014) *Reflective practice: writing and professional development* (4th edn). London: Sage.

This interesting book examines the value and relationship of reflective writing in professional learning.

NCTL Teachers' Standards (Early Years)

Standard 8.6

- Reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of provision, and shape and support good practice.

Hayes, C., Daly, J., Duncan, M., Gill, R. and Whitehouse, A. (2014) *Developing as a reflective early years professional: a thematic approach*. Northwich: Critical Publishing.

This accessible book discusses key themes within early years provision, with a focus on reflective practice.