Image - Montessori Academy, Critical Reflection (2022)

Reflection is the ability in which we can challenge and change our professional practices, by taking the time to stop, think, and observe the situations that we are confronted (The University of Edinburgh, 2022). Allowing us to incorporate new opportunities, practices and understandings into a child's development and learning, which encourages the child to advance (Victorian Government, 2017). Moon (2000) and Brookfield (1995) both discuss reflection as having the ability to critically think and analyse a situation, by using personal and professional experiences and skills. Reinforced by Finlay (2008) this discussion by defining reflective practice within the early years as 'learning through, and learning from experience', which provides the opportunity to gain new insights of ourselves and the way in which we practice. Within the 21st century, reflection is a crucial part of a practitioner's role, as it allows us to enhance our own professional knowledge and enables practice procedures to be refined (Reed & Canning, 2009). When our reflections are recorded and in depth, it permits practitioners to use their observations for future reference. This provides the ability to make both adaptations to their practice, enabling informed decisions to be made to improve their professional practice and enhance the care that they provide for the individuals within their early years setting (Hallet, 2013). Due to an individual's circumstances, preferences and the varied ways in which reflection can be carried out, the University of Cambridge (2021) states, that a person's personal reflection cannot be carried out in neither a right nor wrong way. When achieved, reflection can be essential in enabling the developments of new initiatives, policies and improve practices in a practical, carefully considered, and tested way. Individuals can reflect in different ways, as long as they develop insight and learn the lessons from their reflections and by utilising the outcome results, enabling the individual to enhance their professional practice (Roberts & Stark, 2008)

Farrell (2004), Brock (2015) and Elliott-Johns (2014), combined, believe that it is the responsibility of every professional practitioner to look and reflect on their own practices. By performing meaningful and personally owned reflections on all their individual beliefs, philosophies, and theories, which they practice both within and outside the Early Years setting, enables the practitioner to enhance their knowledge and professional practice. (Entwistle and Peterson, 2004) Proceeding to state that, when reflection becomes a natural daily process, practitioners' awareness, and attention to one's own practice is increased, to inevitably benefit their professionalism. Tarrant (2013) states, that it is essential to carry out personal reflection, but it is also extremely beneficial to have the opportunity to discuss and reflect as either a team or a pair. By exploring other individuals' points of view and by reflecting on their experiences, it allows a setting to adapt processes and practices. By engaging in this process, the options of sharing decision-making and exchanging ideas can enable positive partnerships between all staff, children, and their families. The reflective process, when applied to the practice of observations, can enable the setting to assess the outcomes of current curriculum planning. This can ensure that an individual child's development stage is identified and that any further support needed can be accessed and put into place, it enables the practitioner to identify any wellbeing or safeguarding issues and it can also enable practitioners to identify any short falls within the planned activities.

There is a vast array of theories regarding reflection and reflective practice. In 1904, John Dewey became the founder of reflection and one of the first theorists to explore the idea of reflective practice. He identified three important attitudes which he believed should be fostered into practice to become an effective reflective thinker: 'open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness.' Dewey (1933) goes on further to expand on these attitude's, expressing the facts that a professional who fosters this frame of mind within their practice, has the ability to not only show, but to accept the views and perspectives of others, show responsibility in the broader and wider sense of the child, encompassing factors beyond the framework of the setting itself and by wholeheartedly reflecting and working with the child and their family within the context of regional, local and national practices; policies; and provisions. Furthermore, Dewey (1933) regards reflection as a continuous process in which a practitioner's knowledge and underlaying beliefs should be continuously considered, and that to illuminate their own beliefs, values and working practices, other beliefs and additional knowledge should be reflected upon. Miller et al (2005), reflected and agreed upon Dewey's notion of the three-attitude theory, and continued further to say that within the current changing world of early years, the relevance of continuous reflection is an essential part of professional practice. Schön (2006) proceeded to follow Dewey's 1933 concept, that reflection, is a process of problem solving, and begins when the practitioner adopts the belief, that the issues that they are faced with, are problems that need to be solved. In 1991, Schön developed two concepts of reflection, these are, 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on practice'. The act of 'reflection in action' or 'during a situation', works on the principal of, what is the current situation in front of you, the need to decide on how you should act and to act immediately. Whereas 'reflection on practice' or 'after the fact', allows us time to reconsider the situation and think about ways in which our actions can be adapted for the future in a more in-depth manner.

Image : Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

The University of Edinburgh

Image : Driscoll's Model

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Working in hand with these theories, are a plethora of 'Models of reflection', which can assist individuals through the process of reflective practice. Providing an easy-to-follow structure, in which an individual can be guided through their reflective process, enabling the situation to be assessed at all levels and in detail, to provide a clear starting and ending point to the whole process. When models are combined with others, it allows a customised reflective model to be created, which can provide the appropriate reflection analysis for the needed outcomes and improvements. Based on a six-stage cyclical model, Gibb's Reflective Cycle (1988), is recognised as one of the most regarded and recognised frameworks in reflection. It uses the method of reflecting on a situation, through the process of exploring by way of experience, allowing individuals to use their experiences whether good or bad, and to learn and plan for the eventuality of the situation being experienced again. By concentrating on the following six stages: Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion and Action Plan, it enables us to arrive at a situation where all possibilities have been evaluated, and a clear and concise action plan can be established. In most situations, a practitioner's time is limited, and the time required to complete Gibb's reflective cycle process thoroughly, can exceed the spare time available. With this issue in mind, and the importance of reflecting on our practices, in 1994, John Driscoll developed another simpler model. This model worked on the three principal questions developed some twenty years earlier (Borton 1970). Driscoll's (1994) model, starts firstly by looking at the situation or the experience in context, to give a clear idea of; 'What?' exactly happened, he then proceeds to look at the question of; 'So What?', what are the results from this experience and how did we learn from this situation, and finally, the last stage, is the 'Now What?', or the analytical stage of the reflective process. This stage is the outcome results of the reflection, it enables us to adapt our current action plan, by either changing our behaviour, trying something new, or, if all went well, to continue as we are. Like all reflective models, Driscoll's (1994) model has its own drawbacks, this includes the depth of reflection and insight gained by following this plan, but when combined with additional models, it enables us to increase the depth of our reflection on each level. When Driscoll's (1994) three questions are repeated within the 'descriptive', 'theoretical' and 'action-orientates' levels, a deeper reflection outcome can be achieved. Bolton (2009) discusses the fact that by taking ownership of our own reflective practice, empowers us as individuals to develop our own 'voice', and to use our personal attributes, experiences, strengths, and qualities to become an effective reflective thinker.

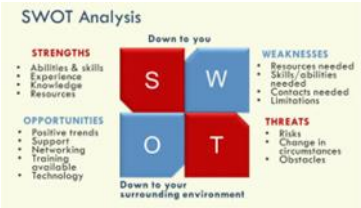

Image: SWOT Analysis

Symonds, (2022)

With all the theories and models that are available, Bassot (2016) discusses the need for practitioners to reflect on a regular or daily basis, she goes on further to discuss, that the process of your reflections should be recorded thoroughly. Revisiting our daily decisions, need not be the actions of reflecting on just the negative experiences or situations that we encountered during the day, but on all aspects, including the positive side. Having the ability to reflect on all experiences, can provide individuals with professional knowledge and insight, that is needed to become an adaptive, positive, and reflective practitioner in every situation. By simply adopting the use of a reflective journal, a notebook, index cards or even post it notes, it enables us to record the details of our experiences (Bassot, 2016). Limited time within our settings, hinders our ability to carry out in depth reflections in a timely manner, but by writing down notes of the situation on a post it note, allows us to return later, when time is available to elaborate on these reflections further, as either an individual or within a group setting. By having the means, to return to our reflections, it enables us to become more aware of ourselves, have the ability to learn from our feedback and primarily having the knowledge to manage change (Grant, 2012). Furthermore, to the options provided by Bassot (2016), there are additional ways of recording reflective practice, these can include adopting processes such as SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is a versatile tool which enables us to break down the reflective process into four sections: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunity, and Threat (Bassot, 2016). It provides us with a foundation to begin our reflective process, enabling us to look at all aspects of the decision-making process, and, by providing us with a balanced approach to assess a situation; plan; or an idea, by looking at both internal and external factors which may impact on the desired outcome. We can incorporate SWOT analysis into the way we educate and record children's development within our setting, providing a clear indication of a child's progress, which can then assist by furnishing parents with the relevant information required on parents' evenings (Bassot, 2016).

When following all the methods and theories above, reflective practice encourages us to be critical of our practices and actions. With this notion in mind, we can conclude that reflective critical practice is a corner stone in which we can build our knowledge and professionalism upon. Empowering an individual to take control of their own future, by reflecting, critically evaluating, analysing, and planning for their own personal and professional development; by sparking different ways of thinking; problem solving; or tackling issues and unknown situations, and by building upon and linking past experiences and lessons learnt. It is the key stone for anyone working within the early years setting, it enables every practitioner to provide a holistic approach to all children within their care. Enabling and encouraging a safe; caring; knowledgeable, and evolving environment for the children to grow and learn.

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