

The significance of reflective practice as a professional practitioner

What is reflection and reflective practice?

Reflection is the ability to review a given situation or experience and learn from it, it has been a source of discussion as far back as the time of Greek Philosophy and it has been written about a great deal, however it is generally agreed that by implementing this process new appreciations and understandings can be acquired and obstacles reframed (Farrelly 2010). Boud et al (1985) quotes that reflection is “a complex and deliberate process of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from it”. Reflection can be from both a negative and positive aspect, whether it be that an activity did not go as you thought, or one that was extremely successful, there can still be room for improvement and lessons learned if reflective practice is enforced. University of Cambridge (2021) states that reflection is personal to the individual and depending on the circumstances, there is no definite way to reflect. According to Schon (2007) there are two different types of reflection: reflection in practice and reflection on practice. Meaning to either reflect while in the moment, which could lead to missed opportunities or after something has happened, resulting in the reflective process being taken to a higher level. Schon also notes that a practitioner that is competent, knows more than they can verbalise, and exhibits a kind of knowing-in-practice. It is an important attribute for being an early years practitioner, to develop core reflective skills to improve knowledge and understanding as a professional, not only on a personal level, but with that of the children in their care, their parents/carers and with the other professionals they work with. In order to demonstrate reflective practice and behaviour a practitioner requires key qualities and attributes; to be able to problem solve and find a solution, be able to reason clearly, evaluate and discuss problems, provide and receive constructive feedback, learn from others and be open minded to their views, research, pedagogy and theories, but also to explain their own values and beliefs (Hallet 2013).

Reason, Evaluation, Feedback, Learn, Explain, Consider, Think.

Reflection in the Early Years Setting and Professional Practice

Hallet (2013) states that to be able to improve the care and practice that they provide, a practitioner needs to implement reflective practice by making informed decisions regarding the planning they apply and that it is effective.

In your establishment you may be required to complete a reflective accounts form as evidence of your reflective practice, these can be kept in a folder and can be a useful tool not only as evidence to others, but also for you and other practitioners to physically refer back to in the future should a similar situation arise.

In the Reggio Emilia region, in Northern Italy, documenting pedagogy for reflective dialogue is used in early years settings. There, to reflect on and discuss children's learning, they allocate time and space to group together and use a wide range of documentation, including written notes, voice recordings and videos. By using this process, practitioners are able to use reflective discussion including the visual documentation to see the strategies and learning processes that each child uses (Rinaldi 2005)

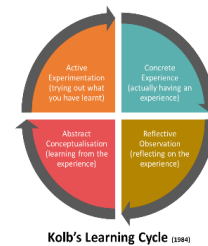
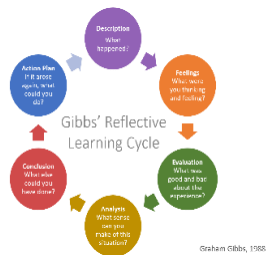
Smidt (2015) states that the introduction within settings around the world of more accessible digital devices play a key role in documenting children's progress, because professionals are able to capture photos or short sequences of films of what is said and done by an individual or group of children, it makes recording, and therefore reflecting, easier than writing out a form or report, but Smidt believes the analysing practice itself remains the same.

In New Zealand, Margaret Carr (2012) along with her colleagues developed a system which is used in kindergarten, called Learning Stories. They are a collection of snapshots and text, recording day to day events and activities within the setting for each child and can be a useful tool to reflect on the learning journeys of the individual, as groups or in the setting as a whole. Through reflection and analysis, observations can reveal aspects of a child's development, practice or provision that may have otherwise been unknown and therefore unaddressed (Hallet 2013)

Within an early years setting, there are many different ways in which reflection can take place, it does not have to be an individual task for each practitioner, it could be carried out in pairs, or like in Reggio Emilia, it can be in groups. One could be observed by another practitioner and either the observer reflects on their colleague or on the activity that they have planned. In these ways, practitioners can feel safe, supported and confident that everyone involved is on the same page, they can bounce off each other and create an environment that is professional and trusted.

Another crucial skill in our role as an early years practitioner is to not only to build good relationships with our colleagues, but with the children in our care and their families. Communication is key. According to Dunhill (2009) communication with children, young people, their families and carers is a fundamental part of the Common Core, it requires understanding, responding, listening and questioning to what is being communicated. Communication comes in many forms, words are just a small percentage and it can vary by the tone of voice, but also posture and positioning, eye contact and overall body language should be taken into account. Having the skills to communicate effectively, involve and engage with parents/carers about their children's development and well-being in your setting is invaluable. As the African proverb conveys, it takes a village to raise a child (origin unknown), the children being the most significant and important people, being at the heart of our professionalism, with this in mind we as practitioners need to constantly strive to improve and develop how we work and think, thus using a reflective approach in our everyday practice.

Brock (2014) quotes “for reflection to be purposeful it needs to be meaningful and, for early practitioners, it therefore needs to relate to their work with young children and their families”.



Theoretical frameworks and models of reflection

There are numerous different models and frameworks of reflection that can support and guide a practitioner in the ever-evolving challenges of their role as a professional, they can also offer structure, which for some, especially new practitioners, or those with time constraints, can be beneficial. Reflective thinking is often considered to have many different levels, one way to prompt deep and purposeful thinking about what took place is to use a framework and reflect on the experience. The 5Rs is one such framework, the five elements of this framework are Reporting, Responding, Reasoning, Relating and Reconstructing (Bain et al 2002), this model addresses five main steps. By thinking of all of these it will allow you to focus on the essential components of the experience, therefore being able to produce an engaging reflection and can be useful for writing constructively (University of Edinburgh 2021). The Gibbs' Reflective Learning Cycle is made up of six stages and is one of the most famous. It is different from many other models, because it takes feelings into account, how you feel in a situation or experience can have a large impact on how you reflect on it. Being one of the more complex frameworks may be reassuring or daunting, it depends on your personal preference which framework would suit best, or it may be that you choose a given framework depending on what you are reflecting on at the time. One of the simplest models based on three questions that American school teacher, Terry Borton had asked, Reach, Touch and Teach, was developed by John Driscoll: What? So What? Now What? According to an article by University of Cambridge (2021) if you ask yourself these three simple questions you can start to analyse and learn from your experiences. To set in context, we should first describe the experience or situation – What? Then to reflect on what we learned as a result we are asking, So What? Finally, ask about the action we will take as a result, would we do anything differently or keep it the same – Now What? The outcome is equally valid whether you decide to make changes or not. Kolb's Experiential Cycle which was created by David Kolb, an American educational theorist in 1984 and is another useful reflective model, within it are four key stages and is based on theories about how we learn holistically, this model focuses on the concept of developing understanding from active experiences. The model suggests that we begin with a concrete experience, this can be a repeat of an experience that has happened in the past or something totally new, the second stage of the cycle involves reflection observation, was there anything about the experience that we have not observed before. In the third stage, Abstract Conceptualisation, we begin to learn and develop new ideas as a result of our conclusions, for example, if the experience was not what we expected, we try to figure out why and whether we could do it differently for another outcome the next time. The fourth and final stage, Active Experimentation, this time by applying the new ideas to other experiences we are able to demonstrate that we have learned as a direct result of our experiences and reflections, this way the information can be retained for the future. As most of the examples given are all cyclical, we can make an entrance at any point, however, as each stage depends on the others, to develop new knowledge, we should make sure the cycle is covered entirely for effective learning to occur.

To conclude, in order to be a reflective professional practitioner in the early years workforce, one should implement some or all of the described methods of reflection found in this briefing paper, alternatively, this paper could provide some inspiration to research the existing examples further or to find additional models that would be more suitable or benefit the way reflection is carried out within a childcare setting, whichever direction is chosen, it is important to ensure that although reflection aids professional and personal development and knowledge, the main focus is on the well-being and development of the children in our care and with their families. By using effective communication, observation and reflection skills, practitioners can learn more about the developmental milestones of children, be able to better understand children from their perspective and therefore plan accordingly in the future or possibly see where a child may require extra support or guidance. It is not just children who learn and grow, we as practitioners do too and it is important for us to continually develop our knowledge and skills as a professional, incorporating reflection, mindful awareness, effective teamwork and communication. Enjoy your journey of reflection.

References

- Bain, J.D. et al (2002) *Reflecting on practice: Student teachers' perspectives*. Flaxton, Qld: Post Pressed.
- Borton, T. (1970). *Reach, Touch and Teach*. London: Hutchinson
- Boud, D., Keogh, R. and Walker, D. (1985). *Promoting Reflection in Learning: A Model. Reflection: Turning Reflection into Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Brock,A. (2014) *The Early Years Reflective Practice Handbook*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Carr, M and Lee, W (2012) *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*. London: Sage.
- Driscoll, J. (ed.) (2007) *Practicing Clinical Supervision: A Reflective Approach for Healthcare Professionals*. Edinburgh: Elsevier.
- Dunhill, A., Elliott, B. and Shaw, A. (2009). *Effective communication and engagement with children and young people, their families and carers*. Exeter: Learning Matters.
- Farrelly, P. et al. (2010) *Early Years Worked-Based Learning*. Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.
- Gasper M. (2010) *Multi-agency Working in the Early Years: Challenges and Opportunities*. London: Sage.
- Gasper, M. (2015). Professional Practice and Early Childhood Today, in: Reed, M (2015). *A Critical Companion to Early Childhood*. 1st edn. London: SAGE.
- Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.
- NSPCC. (2021) *History of child protection in the UK*. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-protection-system/history-of-child-protection-in-the-uk> (Accessed: 30 October 2022).
- Rinaldi, C. (2005) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Schon, D.A (2007) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Slidesalad (2022) *Driscoll Model of Reflection [online image]* Available at: <https://www.slidesalad.com/product/driscoll-model-of-reflection-google-slides-template> (Accessed: 29 October 2022).
- Smidt, S. (2015) *Observing Young Children: The Role of observation and assessment in early childhood settings*. 2nd edn. Oxon: Routledge.
- UNICEF. (2016) *Children's Rights*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> (Accessed: 30 October 2022).

University of Cambridge (2021) *Reflective practice toolkit*. Available at: <https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/introduction> (Accessed on 29 October 2022).

University of Edinburgh. (2021) *Reflection Toolkit*. Available at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience> (Accessed: 29 October 2022).