

What is reflection and reflective practice?

Reflection is a skill all practitioners should aspire to have. Tarrant (2013) states that Bolton suggests reflective practice is one's ability to analyse a situation or event and reflect upon what has happened whether individually or with other practitioners, therefore being able to discuss openly about their practice and ways to improve. When a practitioner reflects on their own professional practice this allows them to improve on their practice and see what could be done differently, also expanding their professional knowledge. Soren Kierkegaard stated that life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards (Evans and Walsh, 2006). Meaning that one's practice can be understood in more depth upon reflection. Aubrey and Riley (2019) state Schon believed there were two different types of reflection. Reflection on practice and reflection in practice. Reflecting whilst in practice means practitioners are reflecting in the current situation, meaning they may miss vital opportunities to reflect or evaluate fully. However, when a practitioner reflects on practice this is a higher level of reflection. If a practitioner were to encourage an activity with a purpose and then reflect upon that activity once completed then the practitioner will understand what they could potentially do differently in order to improve the activity and learning opportunities, develop skills and expand their knowledge.

There is no right or wrong way to reflect, as every practitioner will reflect differently depending on their own personal preference or circumstance (University of Cambridge, 2021). Practitioners who use reflection continuously will be able to make informed decisions on whether the planning they provide is effective or not, ensuring they are able to improve their care and practice (Hallet, 2013).

Reflection within the early years setting

Carrying out self-reflection is beneficial, however carrying out reflection with other colleagues or as part of a team is just as important according to Tarrant (2013). By doing this, practitioners are able to gain the support of their colleagues to help through the reflection process and ensures a safe and professional working space for reflection to take place. Carrying out group reflections will add new depth to a practitioner's personal and professional development (Tarrant, 2013). This would also be an opportunity to have different colleagues observe the children taking part in activities and then being able to reflect on their findings as part of a team, which will aid one's professional development.

According to Siraj-Blatchford (2009) skilled practitioners will be able to engage in sustained shared thinking when working within the early years. This would involve a practitioner working with the child and encouraging conversations and activities that evokes their curiosity. A practitioner could ask open minded questions to the child encouraging them to talk and then affirm what the child thinks or believes. During this it is important for the practitioner to actively listen to the child and therefore reflect upon what they have heard. This will also help to enable nurturing relationships and trust with the children (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

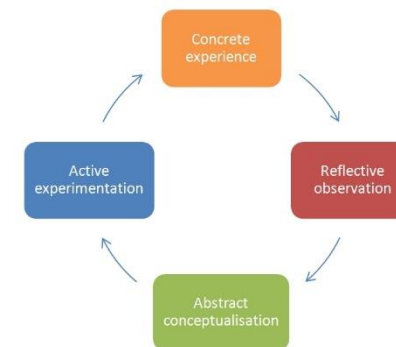
Paige-Smith and Craft (2011) suggest that the key in professional practice is to build good relationships with colleagues, children and their families. Being able to include the parents or carers and keep them informed on their child's development and their behaviour within a setting is a crucial part of a professional practitioner's role. Being able to communicate effectively with parents or carers and inform them of their reflective process, the practitioner and the parents can then work together. The parents will be able to reflect on situations whilst at home and share these with the practitioner which may be helpful when all findings are put together. Doing this will ensure the best plans are put in place for the child to aid their holistic development (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011).

By reflecting with parents, children and other colleague's practitioners will be encourages to use their problem solving skills and find solutions and give and receive constructive feedback in order for them to reflect upon their practice in a professional way (Hallet, 2013). Within time the practitioner will also develop tacit knowledge, meaning they have a deep understanding of their own practice and reflective cycle as they do it so often.

Reflection within professional practice

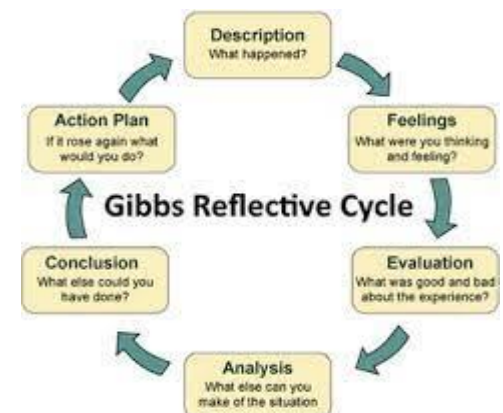
Professional practitioners are able to develop and expand their knowledge through experiences by carrying out reflection. According to Tarrant (2013) carrying out reflection continuously is very important as a professional practitioner as it allows one to reflect on their own practice and ensures they continuously improve and develop their professionalism. Tarrant (2013) continues to state that professional practitioners have a responsibility to take an equitable approach and ensure all children are being provided with rich learning experiences. Taking into account each individual child's needs and ensure they are being met. As practitioners reflect upon their own practice, they will be able to observe whether the children's needs are being met or not, and therefore put plans in place to ensure they are providing the upmost care. By applying a reflective approach to their practice this increases a practitioner's awareness and ensures they remain in control and allows them to identify their own strengths and weaknesses to help better their practice. Applying reflective practice is something a practitioner should be implementing in their everyday practice to improve on their own teaching. It is important for reflection to be meaningful in order for it to be effective, therefore for a professional practitioner it needs to be directly related to their work with children in the early years (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011).

While reflecting helps to improve a practitioner's own practice and knowledge, it is also beneficial in ensuring the children are gaining from the activities and the curriculum that is being provided for them. Practitioners can use observation techniques to observe the children taking part in activities and take note of many things they see or hear, and then carry out reflection in order to see what stage of development the child is at. In addition, any extra support the child may need and also their likes and interests. The more a practitioner applies reflection within their practice the more natural it will become, ensuring they are able to provide the upmost in their profession (Johns, 2017).



(Source: Nicole-Brown, no date)

(Source: Wordpress.com, 2014)



Models and theories of reflection

There are several different models of reflection that a practitioner could consider, and therefore use as a guide to help one reflect. Although all the models are slightly different, some with more stages than others, they do have their similarities also.

Kolb's Experimental Cycle which was created in 1984 is a useful model for reflective practice and is used as a guide for reflection. It is a small reflective cycle, however Bergsteiner, Avery and Neumann (2010) suggest it is very effective. Kolb's model contains 4 stages with the aim of developing understanding through experiences. The four stages included are concrete experience, reflective experience, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The key to Kolb's model is to start with an experience. This could be an activity that has been done before or something completely new. Within the following stage a practitioner would reflect upon the activity and make note of anything that was particularly good or anything that could have been done differently or improved. Upon completion of the reflective stage a practitioner could then apply anything they have learnt to their future practice, demonstrating what has been learnt is a direct result of reflection within practice (University of Cambridge, 2021).

Another reflective model is The Gibb's Reflective Cycle and is considered one of the most famous reflective models that practitioners use. Graham Gibbs created the Gibb's reflective cycle in 1988 with it being considered a more complex model made up of six stages to lead one through the reflection process. The Gibb's reflective cycle's six stages include description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. The University of Edinburgh (2022) state that the Gibb's reflective cycle gives structure to learning from experiences. It provides a framework for examining experiences and is aimed at repeated experiences, although does work well for single experiences also. When a practitioner reflects on these six stages in depth that will allow them to critically evaluate what was being reflected upon and improve for future practice.

These models are a useful guide for practitioners to use or a place to start when beginning to reflect. As a practitioner starts to develop their reflective practice they may use different methods of reflection to better suit the situation.

It may also be worth using a reflective accounts form when carrying out any reflections as this will give the practitioner space to write down any notes from the experience they are reflecting upon. These are normally provided by the setting in order for one to document their reflection process. These forms are usually straight to the point and enables the practitioner the chance for written documentation on their experience of what worked and what maybe did not work so well, and an action plan on how to improve for next time.

According to University of Cambridge (2021) there will be several pros and cons to reflective models. Some of the pros include: If a practitioner was new to reflective practice then this would give them a good starting point and structure to follow. In addition, it will act as a guide for a practitioner and help through all stages of the reflection process and assess all levels of a situation. However, although these models can be effective and useful there are cons to using them. Some of the reflective models imply that in order for the process to be successful then a series of steps must be followed, this is not always the case. During a practitioners everyday practice the models may not always apply, they may need to change certain elements of the reflection to better suit the situation. Reflection is a continuous process that will become part of a practitioners everyday life within the early years. They may be able to apply reflection techniques they have previously used that have proved successful without having to go through each individual stage again.

Donald Schon's reflective theory believed that reflection is the ability for professional practitioners to think about what it is they are doing whilst they are doing it (NursingAnswers, 2019). He believed that practitioners are knowledge based and they must think on their feet and call upon previous experiences and apply them to new situations in current practice. Schon also believes that professional practitioners become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from experiences whilst carrying out reflective practice. This theory developed by Schon suggested that the way a practitioner handles a new situation demonstrates their ability to reflect in action by making necessary improvements to their practice. Following this the practitioner is then able to reflect on this situation and determine if it was effective or not in order to further develop their skills and knowledge as a professional practitioner (Moon, 1999). Schon believed that the knowledge a professional practitioner has is the key to the development of the setting. The knowledge a practitioner has whilst in action is known as tacit knowledge, this is both intuitive and automatic. Brock (2014) suggest that a practitioner develops their tacit knowledge by learning through experiences whilst working with children. Through working with the children and building up a good relationship with them the practitioner will learn what their personalities are like and their needs. They are then able to recognise when something is 'off' with the child and when to step in and take action. The practitioner may not always be able to explain why they know something is 'off' with the child as this is through their tacit knowledge.

Conclusion

In Conclusion it is evident from the above reflective methods that a practitioner would have all the tools they require to begin their reflective practice journey. Being able to reflect is a vital part of being a professional practitioner within the early years. By implementing reflective practice the practitioner is ensuring that the children within their setting are getting the most out of their time there and ensures they are learning and developing fully. Reflection does not just benefit the children within the setting, it is also a good way of developing ones own professional knowledge and aiding development.

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