Reflective Practice and the Early Years Sector

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What is Reflection? Reflective Practice is used within the ever-changing Early Years environment to ensure that the practitioner is monitoring and evaluating their work and ensuring that their practice is always current and effective. Cottrell (2017) defines reflection as structured, focused, and conscious thinking that aims to deepen the understanding that we have on a topic or subject. Reflecting on current practice is necessary to ensure that changes can be made when required and to ensure that the practitioner is always using the most up to date and best response. According to Hallett (2013) there are two types of reflection that can be used in everyday practice. These are, Reflection in practice and Reflection on practice. Reflection in practice makes reference to a practitioner who may be thinking about and adapting their work as they undertake it. Reflection on practice denotes a practitioner who may reflect on their practice after the event or activity has taken place. Schon (2007) describes reflection on practice as the higher level of reflection as the practitioner must link their practice to appropriate theory and develop new ways of working going forward. Cottrell (2017) describes reflection as an intensive activity that should take not only physical time but mental energy. It should aim to challenge perspectives and opinions by changing the focus on a subject. This, in effect, magnifies professional practice and experiences and identifies the component parts and any contributing factors. By reconsidering the context of a situation it is possible to calrify patterns, identify motivations, and demonstrate a deeper understanding. The information that follows will demonstrate how reflective practice fits in to the Early Years Sector and how the practitioner can adapt theories and models of reflection to fit their professional needs.

Reflection and its role within professional practice Within professional practice, reflection is vitally important. It is essential that the practitioner adopts an open minded and responsible approach to working with children and reflection is an off shoot of this. Practitioners should be engaged in thinking about children and outcomes for children not only in their practice but also in the broader sense (Iriss 2017). Brock (2015) states that reflection is about analysis and exploring a problem to discover different viewpoints and solutions. It is important that the practitioner understands the need for reflection and in-depth analysis in order to move forward professionally. Moon (2006) believes that reflection and reflective practice are core values of a professional practitioner and play an integral role within the Early Years workforce. Tarrant (2013) suggests that professionalism is positively impacted by the correct use of reflection. It is understood that by reflecting on practice a person becomes more aware of, more in control of and more able to visualise their strengths and development needs. Hallett (2013) describes the growing need for Early Years Practitioners to be reflective within the Early Years environment which is a consistently shifting plane. Edwards (2000, quoted in Hallet, 2013, p.25) states that Early Years Practitioners use professional knowledge to translate policy in to practice within the work setting. Foley and Rixson (2008, quoted in Hallet, 2013, p.25) agree with this when they say that the outcome for children does not depend upon the policy of government but instead on the way in which the practitioners translate this policy by using the professional knowledge already held to reflectively learn from, modify, and improve provision and outcomes for children. Cottrell (2017) demonstrates the reason for using reflection in professional practice and describes the benefits gained from it, such as the ability to easily link theory with meaningful and practical experience and it provides a solid connection between experience and academic and professional development. In addition to this reflection gives credit to the learning that the practitioner does in the non-academic setting. The proper use of reflection within professional practice develops the skills of understanding and dealing with difficult work situations and generally improves professional standards.

Hargreaves and Page (2013) explore the rationale that professionals who use good reflective practice are also practicing ethically. Reflection can cause challenges to a colleague or one's own practice and can highlight gaps in skills and knowledge base. Highlighting this can be difficult especially in the practice of others but is necessary to ensure we are acting ethically.

Reflection within the Early Years Sector Craft and Paige-Smith (2011) discuss the importance of good reflective practice within Early Years Settings. It is suggested that in order to uphold good early years practice, practitioners must reflect upon their practice to develop it and with the aim of possibly changing their methods of working accordingly. It is important that all professionals involved in the early years sector have a mutually beneficial understanding of how reflective practice benefits the outcomes of children. It is vital that reflective practice becomes a valuable tool in the Early Years Sector and that it supports working with children, other professionals, and parents. It is sometimes successful to implement parent led support groups, where parents can support their child's learning from home in close conjunction with the setting. Encouraging our parents to support can have numerous benefits and can happen in many different ways. It is valuable to see the parents as 'equal and active partners' in the role of educating the child (Craft and Paige-Smith 2011). It is important to use reflection to the advantage in professional practice. Reflections should be recorded, monitored, and actioned when necessary to demonstrate and enrich professional development. Cottrell (2017) suggests recording reflections in a structured way, working through the relevant questions, and considering the overall aim. She proposes that the purpose of reflection is to change the way in which an activity or process is viewed at least in part, such that it alters the way we think or act. Change is part of the whole reflective process be it small or large but a change that will be effective in some way. Reflection will mean taking responsibility for the role the professional plays in contributing to outcomes which can be challenging but can also be transformative.

Within the Early Years Sector, the practitioner can use their skills in reflection to analyse and challenge previous assumptions and actions. It is valuable to complete structured reflections in small groups or pairs within settings. This focused approach can highlight issues from differing angles and can proffer more solutions. A good team that supports each other through professional and academic development and considers constructive criticism and praise on an equal footing is the desired outcome.

Lindon (2012) suggests the importance of the practitioner starting a reflective diary. A personal, confidential account that is not designed to be shared. The information held within would ensure a constant watch is kept on self-practice and aims to seek out improvement where necessary. The diary would highlight positives and strengths in practice

Theorists

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher, psychologist and an educational reformer and even today his ideas around thinking, and reflection continue to have baring on practice. Dewey believed that being able to reflect added an additional dimension to a person's thought process. Dewey described how reflecting upon one's work gave valuable insight and meaning to the outcomes observed and proffered that an individual does not learn from their experiences but instead learns from reflecting upon those experiences. Dewey believed that operating as an effective reflective thinker would ensure practice was unprejudiced and well informed (Iriss, 2017).

Donald Shon (1930-97) was an American Philosopher and a professor who taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He developed the concept of reflective practice and was a contributor to the theory of organisational learning. Schon theorised that it is necessary to be able to reflect in order that we can become continuous learners which is an important characteristic of professional practice. Schon demonstrated the need for practice that encompassed theory with an emphasis on the need for reflection which related theory to practice. In essence Schon theorised that there were two types of reflection. One would happen during the effect, and one would happen after. He termed these Reflection in Action and Reflection on Action. (Schon, 2016).

Models of Reflection According to Cottrell (2017) models of reflection provide useful frameworks that assist and provide structure to the process of reflection. There are varying levels of complexity and are dependent on the number of steps required to move through. The most well-known models of reflection are Kolb's experiential cycle (1984) and Gibb's reflective cycle (1988).

David Kolb is an American educational theorist who developed the theory of experiential learning in 1984. Kolb indicates that experience along with observation and reflection, forming concepts and testing in new situations together form his four-part learning cycle. Graham Gibbs developed the Gibbs' reflective cycle in 1988 to give structure to learning from experience. His six-part process involves exploring an experience through description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusions, and action planning.

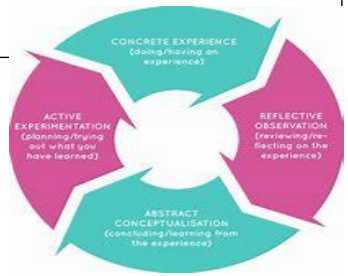
Both Kolb's and Gibbs' models depict how observation and reflection in practice can enable new thinking that can be used in new and developing situations (Brock, 2015). Practitioners who are new to the process of reflection can find both these reflective processes useful as they learn to systematically navigate their experiences highlighting their thoughts, feelings, and assumptions which in turn can be further reflected upon, bringing focus to barriers and challenges and context and significance. There are other simpler models, such as Driscoll (1994) and Borton (1970) which work on the premise of three stages and aim to simplify the reflective process to basically asking three questions, what? So what? What now? It is also possible to adapt or create a reflective model that completely suits the needs of the practitioner (Cottrell, 2015).

Of course, it is important to understand that although models of reflective practice can be useful for the practitioner, especially when first getting to grips with Reflective Practice, there can also be downsides to their use. Models can imply that steps must be followed in a certain way, and it is important to remember that reflection is a fluid process that should not restrict the practitioner from exploring beyond the scope of the structure. It is also imperative to realise that models may not fit in to every situation and this is why being flexible and adaptable in approach is necessary. Reflective practice is a continuous process and must be upheld to gain any professional benefits (University of Cambridge, 2022).

As indicated by Brookfield (2017) the practitioner should not get stuck within the constraints of theory when reflection is simply a sustained and purposeful method of identifying and checking the accuracy of our professional practice.

(Source: Bing images Gibbs Reflective Cycle)

(Source: Bing images Kolb learning cycle)



Conclusion By following the information and methods depicted here the practitioner can learn to become a proficient professional who is fluent in the practice of reflection. The benefits enjoyed from this would include a more comprehensive view of skills and abilities, a practical ability to self-manage, emotional and professional maturity and the benefits of using our experiences to aid ourselves and others. Reflection has been successfully used in health, care, and educational settings for quite some time and the value is recognised as such.

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