The Importance of Reflective Practice as a Professional Practitioner

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What is Reflective Practice?

"Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning". – Donald Schon (cited in University of Cambridge Libraries (no date))

Brock (2015) says that reflection is about considering an issue or problem and exploring it from different angles and perspectives. She points out that the reflection process can take place by reading, researching and developing further knowledge and understanding. Brock (2015) also states that a person's emotions and intuitions will play a part which will help professionals to develop empathy and professional practice that will make a difference to children and their families.

University of Cambridge (no date) points out that reflection is a personal thing and individuals will reflect in their own way. There is no right or wrong way to reflect as it depends on people's individual circumstances. They express that there are many benefits to using reflection in our personal and professional lives. Often we reflect without thinking too much about it but it is important to make time for reflection as it can help us to understand and develop skills further. By reflecting on a particular situation we are able to work out what went well and what could have been better so that we can adjust for the future.

The Importance of Reflective Practice in Early Years

It is important for Early Years Practitioners to carry out reflective practice in their work so that they can strive to providing the best possible environment and experiences for children in their care. Hallett (2013) explains that due to the Early Years sector changing regularly, including policies, the practitioners need to be responsive and reflective to meet the needs of their children and families. She also points out that Early Years Practitioners need to apply reflection to their daily routine as it will help them to improve the provision they are providing and adapt this to meet children's needs. Pilcher (2022) describes an Early Years Practitioner as somebody who is willing to learn from their experiences and has an open mind. She says that as practitioners plan and carry out activities, they will analyse and evaluate them to consider changes that could be made to enhance them further. Pilcher (2022) emphasises the fact that Early Years Practitioners will often take part in many 'learning conversations' during their working day. Professional practitioners will often have conversations with their colleagues or parents about something they have noticed that day about an individual child. These conversations will help the practitioner to have a better understanding of that child's needs, strengths and weaknesses.

According to Edwards (2022) it is important to celebrate what went well when carrying out reflective practice. She explains that sometimes practitioners get carried away looking for negatives and focusing on what needs improving but it is just as important to reflect on good practice and celebrate achievements. Brock (2015) expresses that reflective practice should be embedded in the role of an Early Years Practitioner. Reflection should take place continuously and always be in place rather than being an exercise that is carried out temporarily or on certain occasions. She points out that being reflective is not always an easy task and some individuals may find it difficult to do. In this case, Brock (2015) would suggest that Early Years Practitioners work together with their colleagues to reflect on activities and situations. This would help improve provision as well as enhancing the reflective skills of each individual.

Theories of Reflective Practice

Donald Schon is a philosopher who developed his own theory of reflective practice. He believed that practitioners reflect on practice in two different ways :
Reflection In-Action = the immediate response that we have to a situation which is instinctive based on past experiences. By reflecting in-action practitioners will be thinking about it as it happens and deciding how to act at that time. This can be a useful way to reflect as Early Years Practitioners will often need to think on their feet and adapt activities immediately if they find that it is not working as they thought.
Reflection On Action = when practitioners look back at a situation when they do not get the result they want or expect. By reflecting on action practitioners will have more time to consider how and what they could change to improve. They can also receive input from colleagues or carry out research for more ideas if needed.

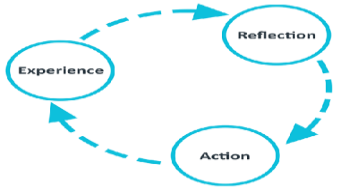
Moyles (2010) (cited in Brock (2015) also considers the theory of reflection and believes that it occurs on four different levels. They levels that she describes are :

1. Of the moment reflection – which is similar to Schon's reflection in-action. Practitioners use their knowledge and intuition to act accordingly.
2. Retrospective reflection – similar to Schon's reflection on action as the practitioner looks back on a situation and considers what happened.
3. Prospective reflection – what will happen in the future.
4. Reflection on reflection – which is to reflect on your own reflection based on your knowledge and understanding. Moyles (2010) expects the practitioner to use theory or a colleague to reflect further and consider more ideas or actions to develop.

Reflective models

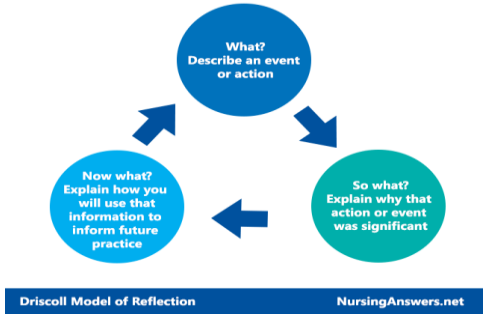
There are many reflective models that can be used to help with carrying out reflection. Each model is presented slightly differently but all cover similar areas to help individuals to complete reflective tasks. Individuals will be drawn to different models depending on their own preference but essentially the same reflective work will be completed regardless of the chosen model.

Jasper (2013) devised the ERA cycle which is one of the simplest models as it only has three stages. The three stages are Experience, Reflection and Action. This model considers experiences that we have, both positive and negative, which leads us to the next stage of reflection. Practitioners will think about their experience and what happened. Jasper (2013) says that feelings will be included in this section as individuals consider how they felt whilst they were in the experience. This reflection will the lead to the Action part of the cycle as a plan is made on what to do next based on the reflection. This cycle is continuous as the action will lead individuals to another experience where they will begin the same cycle of reflection.

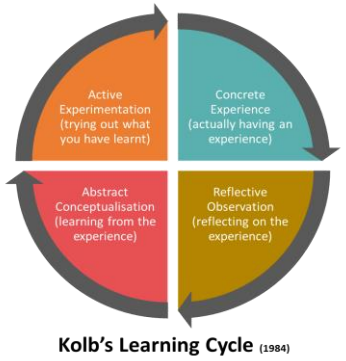


Source – The University of Edinburgh (2022)

Driscoll's What Model is similar to the ERA cycle as it is also a simple model made up of three stages. The stages of this model are based on three questions – What?, So what? and Now what?. This model also asks the individual to consider what happened during the experience, then to consider if everything went well or if there is anything that could be changed. Finally, to consider the changes that will be made (if any) to plan for future experiences. Driscoll (2007) says that it is important to consider that there may be no changes to be made as a result of the reflection as we may complete his model and feel that everything went well and that nothing needs to be changed. He expresses that this is acceptable and is equally as valuable as part of reflection.



Source – Nursing Answers.net (2022)



Source – Inspiring Business Performance (2022)

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) is another reflective model that is set out in four stages and looks deeper into reflective practice than Driscoll's model. The four stages are :

- Concrete Experience
- Reflective Observation
- Abstract Conceptualisation
- Active Experimentation.

This model also asks the individual to consider real experiences and think about how that experience went, including if there is anything they would change. The third stage of this model requires us to consider new ideas or ways that we could develop the experience which then allows for planning for the future in the final stage of the model.

Source – SoR (2020)

Gibb's Reflective model is a more complex model of reflection which contains six stages. It covers the same aspects of the previous models but looks at some sections separately and in more detail. The six stages of this model are : Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion and Action Plan. Again, this model asks the individual to consider the experience in question and how it went. Gibb's model has a separate stage for feelings as they believe that how a person is feeling can play a part in how that experience went. It asks practitioners to consider their feelings before and after the event as they may feel differently afterwards as they have time to think. The next stage allows individuals to evaluate the experience, thinking about what was good or bad from their point of view. By doing this they can analyse why something went well or went wrong and consider ways to adapt the experience. This will then lead to the final stage of Action Plan where we can make the changes and plan for the future.

Pros and Cons of Reflective Models

According to University of Cambridge (no date) reflection is an individual process and practitioners will find the best reflective model to suit their preference. Some practitioners may prefer to use Gibb's model as it considers each stage in more depth and looks in detail at feelings which could play a part in how an experience unfolds, whereas, others may find it too much and prefer to use one of the more simple models like Driscoll's model or the ERA cycle. If practitioners are new to completing reflective practice a simple model is probably easier whilst they get used to using it regularly. Some practitioners would be put off by the wording in Kolb's Learning Cycle, some stages could be difficult to understand which would cause confusion.

How reflective practice can improve quality in the Early Years

According to Hallett (2013) reflective practice can improve quality in the Early Years as practitioners develop their personal and professional self-confidence as they carry out reflection of their work regularly. Reflection in the Early Years can be completed in a number of ways, formally and informally, which will always ensure that practitioners are striving to provide the best possible Early Years environment and experiences. Hallett (2013) points out that often Early Years Practitioners work together in small groups of staff so reflection is usually completed as a group/team. This is beneficial as more ideas and concepts can be shared with everyone working towards the same aim, to provide the best for the children. Also, practitioners can work together to develop their reflective skills and choose a reflective model that works best for them and their setting.

Conclusion

Completing reflective practice will help all practitioners to regularly consider the provision and environment that they provide and always try to improve. As an Early Years Practitioner this form of practice will help to develop them as a professional as they develop their reflective skills further and learn more as they go through the stages of their selected reflective model. Using a reflective model at their setting, particularly during staff meetings, will help all practitioners to analyse and evaluate to a higher standard as well as celebrating achievements together as a team.

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