

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN THE EARLY YEARS

Introduction

Reflective practice is a term heard all the time, but does anyone really know what it is? Let us begin by considering and exploring the underpinning knowledge, theories and models which has contributed to shaping our thinking and action in practice. Everyday people all round the world reflect on situations and everyday problems, Processing the thoughts from the events of the day or situation. This gives opportunity to come to terms with what went well, what did not and what can we do differently next time (Edwards, 2020).



(Landscape reflection, 2013)

Reflection and Professional practice

Firstly, a reflective practitioner must be willing to acknowledge strengths and recognise their own weaknesses. Reflection provides the opportunity to reflect on skills and qualifications with a pursuing to improve practice and reach full potential. The process of Reflective practice provides a clear systematic approach to identify any problems, considering actions then understanding and rationalising choices that are made. Consequently, this identifies the best direction to pursue with any problems or concerns (Harrison, 2012). Practitioners use a continuous cycle of reviewing their practice by reflecting on their experiences and actions which benefits achieving strong professional approaches and improves the experiences offered to children (Moon, 2004). Reflective practice involves the daily routine of observing, monitoring and collecting key data of children and one's actions and feelings. The process involves evaluating the information, analysing, and making decisions which can lead to implementing new policies or changing plans and provision. It is a process which is ongoing and acquires the constant need to reflect to improve practice (Colwell, 2019). Furthermore, the areas to reflect on within early years includes assessment, observation, environment, relationships and direct teaching. The environment is everything within early years children need to be engaged, reflecting on is the environment engaging? If not, what can be done to change this (Houghton, 2017). Additionally, reflecting on relationships can help make them grow stronger and reflecting on observations can decipher if the practitioner has interacted or interfered within an activity too much. Through direct teaching and assessment has the child understood what has been taught? Is the practitioner teaching with purpose? When reflected on this it ensures better outcomes for children whilst questioning yourself continuously provides the opportunity to work the best way possible (Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008).

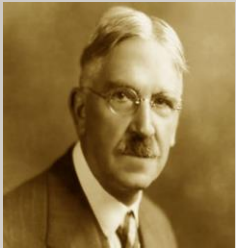
Secondly, to provide high quality provision within early years, practitioners continuously need to review their practice, this consists of their behaviours, learning and interactions within the setting. Early year educators manage a variety of situations and conversations daily alongside adhering to statutory educational standards, legal requirements, educational and learning concerns. Not only is this a heavy workload but also managing the daily demands of the setting involves using a lot of time and resources which leads to stress and anxiety (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). According to Brock, reflective practice can be useful in dealing with difficult or challenging situations, practitioners can become conflicted by the knowledge gained by formal qualifications, training, and the tacit knowledge they have acquired through experience and practice (Brock, 2015). Therefore, open discussions with colleagues offers opportunity to clarify ones thinking about the situation or incident which can lead to a different course of action or difference in perspective (Rykkje, 2017). Klein believes that tacit knowledge is initiative based, something that is not visible, but the practitioner just has that gut feeling and is a valuable tool to have alongside experience (In the Business & Management Collection, Henry Stewart Talks., 2018). Furthermore, reflecting and collaborating with others can involve adapting new perspectives, learning ideas and takes the practitioner out of their comfort zone especially during group work which encourages different perspectives and experiences to be heard. Educators all have their own experiences, knowledge and skills which is a valuable contribution to the workplace. (Gladstone, 2011). Similarly, it is important to remember when participating in workshops reflecting on other people's experiences involves the practitioner to be mindful of how any feedback or opinions expressed is done so in a professional and confidential manner (Meggitt, Bruce and Manning-Morton, 2016). Play Wales points out that, participating in group work peels back the layers to become self-aware, this highlights the nature and impact of their role. Consequently, this creates opportunities for professional and personal development (Reflective Practice for Playwork Practitioners, 2021).

Thirdly, there can be barriers to reflection the biggest problem is time or being unsure how to implement reflective practice. Having the tools can assist in the process of reflection such as a diary, this can capture those personal thoughts, feelings, personal developments, and reflections. Peer observations provides a good method of reflecting on the practice of other professionals and the practitioner (Bolton, 2014). These observations are focused, short and the observer gives constructive feedback. Less experienced professionals find this method useful with room to learn current ideas and approaches from a more experienced practitioner (Peer Observations, 2019). Similarly, seeking the views of others can be valuable for reflective practice by gaining the views of parents, children and other professionals highlights what is working and what needs changing within the setting. Written Feedback forms are a valuable tool which the practitioner can take some time to reflect on and if needed make any changes. It also gives opportunity to talk to the parent at the end of the day which can make them feel valued and involved in the community of the setting (Developing Self Reflective Practice, 2016)

Reflection, Theory and Models

Finally, reflective practice is a theory which over time has maintained those traditional values and principles with adapting modern self-improvement ideas. Which have been clearly defined, refined, expanded upon, taught adopted then applied within practice for the purpose of improvement of teaching, personal and professional development (Models of reflection,2021).

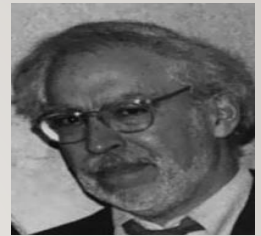
Many different theories and models have been introduced over the years to guide practitioners, all models are similar with common themes, but each model takes a different approach. Some will include more steps and are more in-depth, it is down to personal preference which one to use good understanding of theories and models is needed before it can be applied then introduced into reflective practice (Scott, 2012).



(Time toast timelines, 2021)

Dewey theory provides the foundation for reflective practice. It suggests there are two types of reflection. The first is identified as routine action and the second being reflective action. Routine Action consists of the traditional ways, habits that have formed over time also following the clear requirements of the setting such as policies and law. These actions are less likely to change and form a more stable base where reflective action is vastly different and requires the continuous need to question and self-reflect. (Pollard, 2014). In practice routine action promotes the practitioner to use questions such as, why was it done like that? Then to reflect determine the reason, it could be because that action has always been done that way due to tradition or is it because that way, it gets the best out of the opportunity, the child or ourselves? Reflective Action shows that the practitioner is open minded, flexible, and willing to come out of their comfort zone to enable better practice (Sellars, 2013). Furthermore, those who are guided by routine practice simply follow the plan of day and solve any problems as they arise. Whilst those who are guided by reflective action take a more concerned route in the need to understand the reason behind the problem and challenge such as, it is the way we have always done things, challenging this can stop any future problems arising or unintentional behaviours and outcomes (Moon,2005).

According to Schön, there are three types of reflection. During the first process practitioners can use the tacit knowledge that has been learnt through experience in practice whilst the next type, reflection in action allows professionals to restructure the activity or situation while it is happening or unfolding, it is connected to the element of surprise. Schön suggests, this process can deliver new understanding of the experience with the ability for the situation to change. (Schön, 1992). Thirdly, Reflection on action provides the professional to explore what has happened in a more detailed way such as why did the child act in that way, could they have acted differently. This process is good for reflective writing where professionals reflect on their experiences and improve practise by finding alternative ways. Consequently, after the event or situation has happened the need to reflect on the situation gives opportunity to identify what went well, what went wrong, why it went wrong and what can be done better this can then be reflected within future planning and practice (Slessor, Morago and Macmillian, 2018).



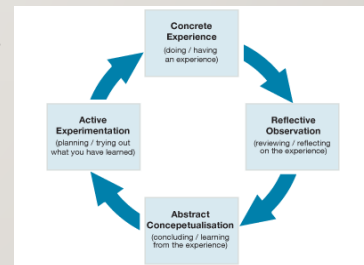
(Tools hero, 2012)



(Aitchison, 2016)

Gibbs reflective cycle suggests, practitioners should reflect continuously, this circle model is structured in phases which breaks down the experience to allow the option to reflect upon the experiences as they happen. Reflecting all the time promotes opportunity for the practitioner to analyse ideas and explore innovative ideas within their practice. Reflective writing and combining Gibbs reflective cycle, provides the option to note down upcoming activities for the week including aims and conclusions (Gibbs Reflective Cycle,2020). Additionally, this method gives the practitioner a way to write their thoughts and feelings before and after a learning experience or activity which can be taken into consideration for future planning. Practitioners that reflect and apply this model will be aware of any issues within their practice and allows them to improve the outcomes for the child and improve the quality of care within the early years setting (Hayes et al., 2014).

Kolb's cycle includes a four-step process that is flexible and can be used at any stage which is based on the theory that the process of learning is accomplished through individual experiences. The four steps consist of beginning with the concrete experience, which is the stage the experience is happening or being done followed by the reflective observation stage, this is the point of understanding, followed by the abstract conceptualisation stage, at this point the person forms an abstract concept from the experience and finally the active experimentation stage the newly formed concept is ready to be used (Brown, 2021). Within early years this may include observing a child interacting within their environment after this experience the professional will reflect. This may raise questions around the environment of the experience could it have been tailored differently to make sure all the children's needs were being met. During the next stage, the professional links theory with practice, using previous experience, reflection, and wider knowledge. The practitioner may link to child development and the link to different models such as the scaffolding theory. Finally, the last stage offers opportunity to do things differently next time to make next time more effective, changing the environment, finding ways to provide better outcomes for children (Oke, 2019)



(Clark, 2020)

Here is an example of a reflective account form, this can be utilized in reflective terms after the activity has happened or after the situation has arisen. It provides opportunity to reflect on the experience and highlights any improvements needed. This method can be useful for describing, analysing, and evaluating experiences this allows the professional to continue to evolve and enhance their skill set by learning from the situation or experience (Reflection in Practice, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude it is truly clear to see that reflective practice is deeply rooted by theory inspired by research that supports practitioners to achieve the highest quality of care and provision for children. It is also visible to see how important the role of the practitioner is and ensuring they are doing the upmost to deliver meaningful experiences to support children achieve the best possible outcomes. Participating in reflective practice allows the practitioner to grow, to have the continuous cycle of gaining knowledge and developing skills and abilities which when combined supports professional development.

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