

# Explaining the significance of reflective practice to facilitate professional development in the early year’s workforce

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## What is reflective practice?

According to Cambridge Assessment international Education (no date) reflective practice is looking back on an experience that took place at work and going on to analyse, dissect, and critically question to gain deeper understanding on what happened, how and why certain decisions were made, and what were the final consequences and overall conclusion of the event. A few examples of critical, open questions one might ask are, why was that the outcome? Was the situation handled professionally? How was everyone involved feeling?

An important factor to explore when reflecting is the emotional element. Boud’s theory suggests that this will enable a professional to explore feelings, values and judgements on a personal and professional level surrounding an event. This can give a more holistic and complete view of the event and help to develop self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and professional strengths. Tarrant (2013) argues that reflective practice will always impact on professionalism, and Brock (2015) agrees that when reflection is done well within the Early years, it will improve daily practice within the workplace.

## Examples of reflective practice questions...

| Situation:                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Looking in                                    | Looking out                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Thoughts and emotions that seemed significant | <b>Describe the situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Describe the situation surrounding your thoughts and feelings</li><li>What issues seem significant?</li><li>What was I trying to achieve?</li><li>Why did I respond as I did?</li><li>What were the consequences of that for my patients/other /myself?</li><li>How were others feeling?</li><li>How did I know this?</li></ul> | <b>Personal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Why did I feel the way I did within the situation?</li><li>What factors were influencing me?</li></ul> <b>Ethics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Did I act for the best?</li></ul> <b>Empirics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>What knowledge did I inform me or could have informed me?</li></ul> | <b>Reflexivity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Does this situation connect with your previous experiences?</li><li>How could I handle this situation better?</li><li>What would be the consequences of alternative actions for the patient/myself /others?</li><li>How do I now feel about this experience?</li><li>Can I support myself and others better as a consequence?</li><li>How available am I to work with patients/families and staff to help them meet their needs?</li></ul> | <b>Plan</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>What could you do differently next time?</li><li>What could you continue to do to help you next time?</li></ul> |

Source:  
Clinical  
Psychology  
Community  
UK, 2020

## Why do we use it?

Schön (1992) talks about reflection being a continuous source of learning. He says that it deepens our understanding and knowledge of the professional workplace and any events that may take place. Owen and Fletcher (2021), explain how becoming a reflective practitioner cultivates self-awareness and a level of emotional stability which can have an influential effect and impact on fellow colleagues and children around you. In doing this, one becomes more open-minded in conversation and flexible in changing perspective, becoming more self-aware of professional strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. Being more aware and comfortable with these helps the practitioner to ask critical questions without fear of failure or appearing incompetent. Instead, they can develop more effective ways of practice through thorough reflection.

Being willing to engage in and be proactive in the process of reflection will make this practice increasingly rewarding, as it will become less about a tick-box practice and more about the values that you adhere to and the outcomes that you are wanting for the children in your care. The picture is far bigger than a single event, and that is why it is vital that we make this part of our whole work ethos. Tarrant (2013) writes about how professional practice is being much more than ‘what they do’, but also about ‘how and why they do it’.

## How can we introduce reflection to an early year setting?

Edwards (2021) says it is vital for us as Early Year’s practitioners to reflect on our methods, approaches, teaching styles, behaviour, and any situations that might arise, as well as the more seemingly insignificant details such as nursery layout and toy choices. When practicing reflection, the practitioner will be better equipped to give children quality experiences and improve on childcare provision, learning and development. Hallet (2013) points out that reflection can enlighten and develop our practice when implementing new findings and understandings. She encourages us to be empowered to question and challenge current ‘norms’ in the workplace through good team-playing and discussions, personal reading and researching, and professional development that could enhance and vitalise a tired workforce that may be stuck in their ways.

Hallet (2013) and Lindon and Trodd (2016) speak of reflection enhancing practice in the Early Years through developing great characteristics within professionals, such as:

- Problem solving – identifying issues and giving solutions
- Being open-minded – accepting new perspectives and thoughts from an array of professionals
- Taking responsibility – having autonomy in discussing new ideas but also proactively following through with and implementing them
- Growing in tacit knowledge – knowing when to change practice and when to keep existing practice.

According to Hatton and Smith (1994) it is vitally important that as practitioners we are looking at and thinking about professional practice regularly. They encourage us to explore, consider, evaluate, and then re-consider the outcomes of our provision and practice, and that we go on to change and improve our provision and practice appropriately, promptly, and when necessary. We can do this by learning from and having productive conversations with colleagues, parents, and other professionals, continuing to develop through training and accountability, taking time for self-evaluation and personal reflection, and working in a networking style so that fresh ideas and propositions are commonplace.

Lindon and Trodd (2016) speak of barriers to implementing reflective practice within the workplace. Some of these may be that colleagues and other professionals are feeling stressed or overtired with a busy work schedule, simply a lack of skill in this area, and others may believe it’s not their responsibility. There can be an initial resistance to a change of practice, but the benefits of reflection outweigh the challenges

### Practical examples of reflection in the workplace:

1. Regular team meetings to discuss the Foundation Phase Profiles, these are assessments of children’s developmental progress or delays. Using team meetings to discuss these assessments will support the practitioner in planning for next steps (Department of Education and Skills 2017).

2. Reflective Account forms are used when writing of an experience within a setting, noting what was learned from the experience, how it will improve professional practice, and how it relates to the professional code of practice (The Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2021).

3. Team training, workshops, and events surrounding the topic of reflection within the early years that employees can attend. Taking information and fresh ideas about reflective practice back to the workplace (National Health Service 2014).

Who should we be using reflective practice?

According to Sharmahd, Peeters and Bushati (2018) anyone who wants to advance in understanding and knowledge of their workplace, anyone working towards social change, anyone exploring complex issues from a variety of angles, and anyone building on new practices with children, parents and colleagues should be using reflective practice.

The Clinical Psychology Community UK (2020) mentions that for reflection to be most beneficial honesty must be at the root to answering all critical questions, instead of answering them the way that is thought to be professional and right. They say that professionals won't always get it right and that reflection can bring up ideas and thoughts, some of which when implemented into practice won't work, and that's OK. The main objective is that we practice implementing professional reflection into the workplace, and this will enhance one's knowledge and understanding when engaging with future situations.

In addition, Hallet (2013) says being a reflective practitioner develops transferable skills that are highly desirable by employers.

Reflective Models:

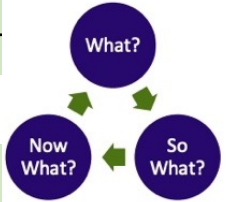
According to MANN, GORDON, MACLEOD (2009), most of the reflective practice models can be cultivated through careful thought. The common thread running through each of these models is the examination of an experience and an implementing of what has been learned into future experiences. This will ultimately widen one's knowledge within work settings, with children and adults alike, creating positive changes. These models are continuous cycles of observation, analysis, and evaluation, later progressing to implementation of new thoughts. Here are a few brief descriptions of reflective models.

Borton's Cue Question Model 1970:

According to Rolfe (2014), Borton's desire as a teacher was to "reach students at personality level, metaphorically touching them as individual human beings, and yet teach them in an organised fashion". Within this concept of teaching his reflective model was birthed – What, so what, now what? Later revised by Rolfe, calling it the minimal model.

In essence, this model asks the three questions:

- What happened (what was the experience?)
- What does this mean (were the outcomes positive or negative?)
- What will I do (the same or differently next time?)

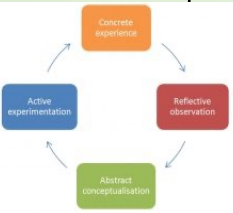


Source: Essay writing service, UK, 2021

Kolb and Fry's Experiential Learning Cycle 1975:

Schenck & Cruickshank (2015) suggest that Kolb's model was highly influenced by Dewey, an early founder of reflection methods, and Piaget, an early 1900's children's psychologist. Dennison (2012) explains that Kolb's model consists of 4 categories:

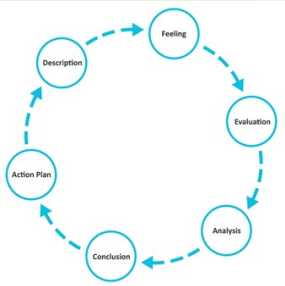
- Concrete experience – thinking about a specific situation and describing what you see, think, and feel
- Reflective observation – asking more in-depth critical questions regarding the situation
- Abstract conceptualisation – having group discussions and coming up with ideas in which to improve outcomes next time a similar situation arises
- Active experimentation – trying out new strategies for improvement based on prior knowledge, personal reflection, and new understanding.



Source: Brown, No date

Gibbs Reflective Cycle 1988:

This reflective model, like the others I have mentioned, help you to work through experiences by analysing, questioning, and evaluating. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (2020) states how it is made up of six stages. Description – describing the experience, Feelings – about the experience, Evaluation – the good and bad in the experience, Analysis – trying to understand the situation, Conclusion – what you may or may not have done differently, Action plan – planning how to deal with future, similar situations.



Source: Gibb's Reflective Cycle, 2020

Reflection Theories..

Dewey – Learning by doing

Willower (1994) explains that Dewey believed that reflection is a deliberate and active process; that, in essence, **we think to learn, and we learn by doing**. Dewey believed that if children were learning by actively doing, for example, growing flowers or taking care of class pets, their physical engagement would encourage conversations, questioning, use of imagination, and role play. Willower says that this would lead to interdisciplinary education, which is the act of adding new knowledge to previous experiences, giving children bigger perspectives and richer thinking skills.

Boud – Reflection and Emotion

Boud believed that both Schon and Dewey's theories were incomplete as he believed that emotions and feelings had an integral part to play in the reflection process. Boud explained that when reflecting on a situation it was vital to understand the significant emotions that were involved, such as fear, panic, anger, embarrassment, or excitement, and that without the acknowledgment of such feelings the reflection wouldn't be thorough. Dochy (2012) explained that Boud believed that reflection following an experience rather than during an experience was more beneficial. He developed three strategies for reflecting on an experience, which were: **Return to experience** (thinking on the details of an event) **Attend to feelings** (what were people feeling during and after the event) **Re-evaluate experience** (what has been learnt and how can the aftereffects better equip an individual in response to future events).

Boud believes that we must be enabling children in their learning. For example, if a child finds a task difficult, rather than move on to another topic, the professional could re-visit that challenging area by taking time to encourage, educate, and discuss with the child until the topic is understood.

Schon – Reflection and Professional Development

Schon (2016) pinpointed three types of reflection within his theory:

**Knowing in action**, which is learnt behaviour. He believed that reflection paired with experiences would instil in us a tacit knowledge, gut-feelings, and instincts, which would better equip us within the workplace, as reflection isn't solely an intellectual exercise (Lindon 2016).

**Reflection in action** is acting in the moment, making decisions based from past experiences.

**Reflection on action** is by looking back on a situation by reflecting and asking critical questions that could better future practice. For example, reflecting back on a painting craft activity with six three year old children in a nursery classroom, resulting in paint splatting everywhere, may lead to a change of practice, such as limiting the crafts to three children per adult, helping to make it a more beneficial educational session. Schon believed that by practicing the skill of reflection that it would better equip us to deal with not only routine events, but also spontaneous circumstances that may arise.

Conclusion:

In researching the unique reflective methods and theorists, one has come to understand the importance of reflecting on and learning from past experiences, being unafraid to implement change where change is needed, to speak up and question when necessary, and develop personal tacit knowledge, whilst reminding oneself that the children are at the centre of all decisions made by professionals. Therefore I want to invest myself fully into reflective practice.

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