The Significance of Reflective Practice to Facilitate Professional Development in the Early Years Workforce

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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 Shon, 1991)

All professionals who work in the early years settings will want to create the best outcomes of care for children. In order to be a practitioner who is reflective, it is essential that research is carried out not just externally to the classroom but also based on own professional experiences to amplify possible new opportunities and responsibilities that can be applied to practice.

Reflective practice is a helpful way to improve the standard of practice given to both children and other staff. This should be continually monitored to modify and adapt any improvements needed to ensure the best possible care outcomes for all young people. (Aubrey, K. and Riley, A. 2019)

Being able to reflect on practice is a trait that all practitioners will have and will allow individuals to increase professional knowledge and productivity by reflecting on own practice within settings. It is a developmental process of classroom-based practice and allows the practitioner to evaluate on own experiences. (Aubrey, K. and Riley, A. 2019)

University of Cambridge (2021) talks about reflection in diverse ways which relate to positive and negative experiences. The University also states that there is correct way to be able to reflect on any experience. If an individual was to reflect on a positive experience it is seen to be more of a happier and more motivational topic to discuss and what parts have worked well during working within the early years sector and how to use these topics in planning for future experiences. However, reflecting on negative experiences may be easier, as bad experiences are often better to learn from, as there is more to improve, creating a way for a useful plan for future learning and development.

The early years continuum is a procedure of ongoing change. Johns, 2013 agrees that reflective practice allows a practitioner to be able to have a voice and to let own opinions and thoughts to be heard. Finding an individual's own subjective voice may be difficult, but sometimes, professionals are encouraged to look further into and confront others to reflect deeper and understand their own reflective processes.

Reflection Within the Early Years Workforce (The Importance and How it can Improve Quality of Practice)

Reflection within the early years workforce is essential to own professional practice and improve the quality of care for children and young people. It is important to make time to reflect as it can help towards future development and learning in settings. It is important that children are understood as best as possible and this can be done by observing and reflecting on practice to identify any needs as well as interests for any further planning that will be carried out.

Observation and planning are a vital part of daily practice for professionals who work with children and young people, allowing practitioners to learn from previous events and experiences. In some schools, there may be a weekly plan that outlines the topics and activities that will occur and at the end of that week, practitioners are able to evaluate all events that have occurred and whether or not it provided positive or negative experiences for both staff and young people so individuals can learn from it and plan ahead for the week after, considering the reflection that has been completed in order for improvements to be made. Keeping routines within the school day will help towards young people's wellbeing as children find comfort in routines, following timetables may also be a useful tool to ensure good quality of practice. (Katherine Haughton, 2017)

In some professional settings such as schools, there may be meetings held after the end of the school day which allows members of staff, mainly teachers, to discuss and evaluate own experiences and thoughts which may allow other staff members to plan own lessons after listening to other individuals. Tarrant (2013) explains that reflection is linked with professionalism and how it is needed in order to learn from experiences and improve on professionals practice. There are many professional values that are linked to being a successful practitioner, most of which go beyond a job description. Most will be role models to children and people within a setting, first aiders and so on. Being able to reflect in settings amongst colleagues will also set up a wall of trust and will ensure that more confidence is developed.

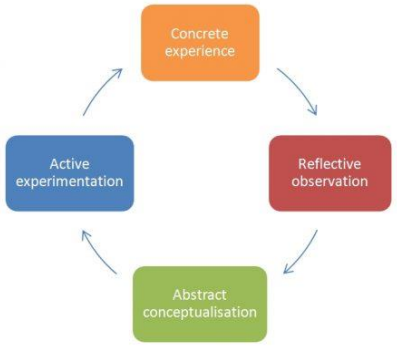
Most settings will involve parents especially during times of reflection and this may be completed either face to face, using newsletters, text messages or even social media. Practitioners need to ensure that good relationships are formed with parents and families of children within the setting to ensure the best possible care outcomes and also, healthy well being for each child. It is essential that practitioners aim to involve parents in a child's school life as it allows parents and guardian to feel more involved in children's progression as well as development. (Craft, Paige Smith, 2011) Involving parents with planning and being invited into the setting and classroom will also ensure that successful plans can be generated to aid children's growth within development and promote inclusion. (Katherine Houghton, 2017)

Loughran (2002) states in (Craft, Paige smith, 2011, p. 22-24) that reflection is essential to aid own development in regards to practice as well as future learning. Practitioners should take into account that the art of reflection allows individuals to see own practice through other professionals views. When practitioners are reflecting on own practice, it is only then after looking back and generating questions, that links are made between practice and events that happen outside of settings and allows for further thinking and improvement of quality of practice.

It is essential that forms of documentation take place in order to keep a record of reflection and how it occurs. A useful way of doing so would be keeping a diary along with dates and ideas which may help towards future learning. Reflective accounts are a useful way of briefly describing the situation, noting both the strengths and weaknesses, and then keeping it towards making a record of improvement for future learning and enhancement of quality of practice within settings. Some members of staff may mention these times of reflection with other practitioners during meetings to share thoughts on how to work together collaboratively to ensure better care and developmental outcomes for children.

Johns (2013) states that during when practitioners are reflecting, it allows the individual to become more self-aware. Reflection gives the professional the chance to become more conscious of own thoughts and feelings and reactions to scenarios. Reflection will eventually become trait that has been learned and practiced which is then applied to everyday early years implementation.

Reflection is a part of everyday practice and allows practitioners to consistently examine own practice which leads to continuing professional development. Through direct teaching and examination, practitioners can reflect on practice by looking back on previous learning and occurrences. By questioning the children after a lesson, it may be a useful way of finding out about different interests and to see whether one topic or activity is more successful than another. Some more formal activities such as assessments can help towards finding children's strengths and weaknesses and determine if a child may need extra support with elements such as literacy, language, or mathematics.



Theories and Models of Reflection

Kolb's model of reflection is related to experiential learning. This model focuses on first-hand experiences based on three stages, including assessment, examination and evaluation. After each stage has been completed, brand new experiences become a new introduction for a different cycle. It is important that professionals use own useful knowledge to be able to reflect on what is already known prior to reflecting.

The four main learning styles of this cycle include concrete experience which is information that is already known or could be a new situation or a familiar one, reflective observation which is where the individual reflects on the experience, abstract conceptualisation which is learning from a certain experience and also, active experimentation where the practitioner is able to trial innovative ideas and thoughts based on what has already been learned previously. During reflective observation, there may be many questions asked as to whether certain planning has been effective or not and allows further evaluation and learning. Observations are crucial to developmental learning in early years settings as it allows practitioners to view strengths, weaknesses and targets of children and young people. Reflecting on these observations will allow professionals to ensure that children receive help and support regarding weaknesses that may be visible from results of being observed.

Gibbs reflective cycle on the other hand, is made up of several distinct stages which allow the individual to travel deeper into own reflection and answer questions related to it. The cycle aims to design different personal reflections and set apart feelings. This cycle consists of describing the situation, speaking about feelings, evaluating the topic, analysis, concluding and a personal action plan. Personal action plans are a useful tool used for evaluating situations and allowing for improvements in future. It allows professionals to think about what can be done differently to improve quality of practice for children and other staff members within a setting. (Dr. Nicole Brown, ND)

Donald Shon's model of reflection involved two main stages of reflection which are reflecting in action and reflecting on action. Both of which are before and after an event has taken place. Reflecting during action allows a practitioner to think on the spot and about what to do next. It also promps the individual to act as soon as possible in order to improve outcomes. Reflecting on action so afterwards allows the professional to gather thoughts and ideas about any improvements that need to be put forward for the next time, by doing so afterwards it also allows the practitioner to be able to have adequate time to reflect rather than the whole process be completely rushed and not thought about in depth. (Bolton, 2014)

By encouraging children to learn in the moment and through firsthand experiences, this will ensure that children are able to increase own thinking skills and be able to be motivated to reach full potential as progression takes place throughout early life and within personal learning journeys. (Katherine Houghton, 2017)

In conclusion to this briefing paper, if practitioners follow any of these methods of reflecting such as Gibb's cycle or Kolb, practitioners will be able to reflect more in depth and to also to improve on care outcomes for children. Reflecting on practice will allow individuals to increase own professional knowledge and support further development and improvements within settings. From the research that has been completed in this report, many theorists such as Gibbs as well as Kolb agree that if certain steps are taken and models are followed, reflective practice can definitely contribute to enhancing quality service provision.

Image sources: (Dr. Nicole Brown, ND)

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