

This essay studies how critical reflection can enhance professional development and services provided to children and their families. Alongside this, Gibbs and Kolb's reflective cycle will be analysed in relation to how effective they are in evaluating and improving practice.

Johns (2013: 3) states reflection is 'learning through our everyday experiences'.

The purpose of reflection is to examine and challenge current knowledge and to develop a higher level of understanding through current research (Paterson and Chapman, 2013). Dewey (1933 cited in Lundgren and Poell, 2016) emphasised reflection is important for learning because it encourages people to think in a purposeful way 'that is systematic and raises questions and answers' (Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009: 365). According to Victoria State Government (2007) there is another level of reflection called critical reflection. Critical reflection involves examining and understanding our own experiences, thoughts and feeling and to discover how they fit in with theories and literature from other authors (Hickson et al, 2016: Ryerson University, 2016). Critical reflection encourages people to question and think critically about their experiences and the information they collect and use in practice, which can lead to a deeper reflection and improve personal skills and professional development (Mann et al, 2009: Aveyard et al, 2011).

According to Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (no date) early years' practitioners have a responsibility to engage in professional development through reflection to continually improve their knowledge related to early years. Dunn et al (2008 cited in Miller et al, 2012) and Urban (2008 cited in Miller et al, 2012) believe that reflection is an important part in professional development. Timmins et al (2013: 137) agrees with this by stating 'reflection is a useful and valuable tool for professional development'. Sheridan et al (2009) mentions that early years' practitioners are expected to have a complex understanding of children's development and education to ensure that they provide positive educational and care experiences for children and families they work with. The emphasis on practitioners having a wide range of knowledge related to early years influences children's learning, development and how prepared they are for future education (Sheridan et al, 2009: Waller and Davis, 2014). This means that practitioners should engage in reflection to challenge and question their work in order to improve practice and develop professionally (Miller et al, 2012). However,

Faure (2008 cited in Miller et al, 2012) believes that for practitioners to professionally develop, the workplace must give them the space, time and opportunity to reflect.

This can be an issue because the workplace may not encourage reflection (Cheng et al, 2015). The workplace is more concerned with people being prepared for the job and following policies and procedures (Fook and Askeland, 2007). This means that they do not provide opportunities to reflect regularly, meaning that practitioners have limited time because they are more focussed on following policies and procedures (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). Alongside this, practitioners have a responsibility to follow policies and legislation related to early years, however these change frequently which means that more time is spent staying up to date instead of reflecting (Venninen et al, 2012; Saric and Steh, 2017).

There are many benefits to reflection (Moyle, 2010). Reflection allows practitioners to learn more about themselves by evaluating their practice and actions, strengths and weaknesses and find ways to improve their practice (Mann et al, 2009; Paterson and Chapman (2013). This can encourage practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of theories, research and practice (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011), this can help to link new information to current knowledge (Lundgren and Poell, 2016) and keep up to date with current changes, research and policies related to early years (Moyle, 2010). Reflection can also help to develop skills such as communication, problem solving, decision making, teamwork and information sharing (Venninen et al, 2012). The Children's Workplace Development Council (2010) highlights the importance of these skills in their six-common core of skills and knowledge for children and young people workforce. These are described as the basic skills and knowledge needed for professionals who work in different backgrounds to work effectively together, with children and their families (Children's Workplace Development Council, 2010).

However, there are some issues with reflection (Cheng et al, 2015). Collin et al (2013) states that reflective practice is an unusual concept and with eighty years of research still no official definition exists. Husebo and Reagan (2015) also agree with this and Beauchamp (2006 cited in Potter, 2015) believes that the lack of a definition for reflection can affect the teaching of it. Gibbs et al (2005) believe practitioners

need to understand the meaning of reflective practice for them to reflect effectively and critically on their practice. This lack of definition can have an impact on people's knowledge of reflection and the benefits of it (Potter, 2015). This can affect the depth and way people use reflection which can have an impact on their practice such as continuously make the same mistakes (Venninen et al, 2012). During reflection it is natural to focus on negative experiences because it is a part of the way we make sense of them (Gibbs et al, 2005: Johns, 2013). By only focusing on the negatives, this can lead to developing negative attitudes towards reflection and having limited motivation to reflect (White et al, 2006). Finally, emotions can have an impact on how people reflect. If professionals have a bad experience during their work, they may avoid reflection as they do not want to relive what happened due to feeling uncomfortable, affecting the way they reflect (Fook and Askeland, 2007: Johns, 2013).

Reflection also supports Community of Practice, this is described as a group of people who share the same passion for something and work together to learn how to make it better (Daniel et al, 2013). Daniel et al (2013) and Glenny and Roaf (2008) mention the importance of regular interactions, allowing people to continuously share, critique and expand their knowledge and practice which helps to support professional development and improve the service quality children and families receive. Mesmur-Magnus and Dechurch (2009) emphasise the importance of information sharing as their study showed that it could help to build a strong team and make positive improvements.

Improving Quality is important because it encourages people to continuously critic and evaluate practice to make changes and improve to support children and families (Reed and Canning, 2012). The quality of an early years setting influences children's learning, development and behaviour (Reed and Canning, 2012). This has been proven by the effective preschool, primary education study and the effective preschool, primary and secondary education study, these studies are some of the largest in Europe that focused on the quality of early years' settings and their effects on children's education and care (Pugh and Duffy, 2014). The studies show that different levels of quality have different effects on children's learning, this means that the higher the quality the setting had; the more positive the effect on children's

development, behaviour and future studies (Pugh and Duffy 2014: University College London, 2017).

However, trust can be an issue in Community of Practice Liou et al (2016). Professionals who do not know each other well may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences (Saric and Steh, 2017). There could be an issue with uneven power (Daniel et al, 2013), this means that professionals/organisation with more power may take control of the situation and not listen to other people's perspectives when making changes (Stewart and Rogers, 2012). Venninen et al (2012) believes for reflection to be successful, all participants need to be listened to and acknowledged. These issues can have a negative impact on children and their families because they would not be receiving the best service, which can affect their needs being met (Pugh and Duffy, 2014).

David Kolb's cycle (1984) was influenced and developed by the work of Dewey's reflective thinking, Lewin's experiential learning and Piaget's developmental stages of children (Moon, 2013: Husebo and Reagan, 2015). This cycle is popular and mostly cited in educational theories because it provides the best understanding of experiential learning (Sharlanova, 2004: Moon, 2013). There are four stages to the cycle which are Concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (University of Leicester, no date). The aim of this cycle is to encourage people to learn through their own experience, from this people can find out the reason for their actions, examine different approaches and gain knowledge from literature to form new ideas and plan how put these ideas into action and to experiment with these ideas, developing a link between theory and practice (Muscat and Mollie, 2012: Hayes et al, 2014). The cycle can be entered at any point in time but people must follow the sequence (Bassot 2016), this is because Kolb believes all 4 stages in the cycle are essential for learning and the learner must give full attention at each stage to gain positive outcomes for personal and professional development (University of Surrey, no date: Muscat and Mollicone, 2012).

Kolb's cycle gives direction to professionals on how to use a range of methods during reflection and to gather information about different theories and practice while learning about their learning style which can help make links between theory and

practice and learn effectively from the experience (Healey and Jenkins, 2000: Sharlanova, 2004). With Kolb's cycle, people can reflect within a group or individually, this can be beneficial when working with a group such as in a Community of Practice as it allows everyone involved to reflect on an experience together and find ways to improve to provide the best quality for children and families (Brock, 2015). When reflection is done independently this can help to identify areas of strengths, weaknesses and improvement which can enhance personal and professional development, which can support the way they work within the early years setting (Healey and Jenkins, 2000: Brock, 2015).

Kolb's cycle is described as simple and gives a description related to how professionals learn from an experience (Bolton, 2014), it also takes professionals on a double loop learning (Healey and Jenkins, 2000). Double loop learning is a process that encourage people to think deeply about their assumptions and involves changing the way they work to do it more effectively (Spitzer, 2007). Double loop learning encourages people to provide different ways to critically reflect and develop self-awareness which encourage change and support their decision making (Richardson, 2014). Because of this it can help professionals to reflect and analyse deeper on their practice which can enhance their professional development and help to ensure that they work effectively to support the children and families that they work with (Healey & Jenkins, 2000: Bolton, 2014). However, because Kolb's cycle is simple, it does not explore areas such as transfer of learning, which can have an impact on the professional as it does not show how it can be transferred to future experiences (Moon, 2013: Hayes et al, 2014). In addition it does not explain different aspects of learning such as psychodynamic, social and institutional (Handbook of teaching and learning in medicine, 2009).

Bassot (2016) mentioned that Osterman and Kottkamp's cycle of experiential learning is influenced by Kolb. Both parties have been criticised because the cycle is shown in a circle which suggests that each stage follows neatly after one another, however when working in an early year practice it does not normally happen this way (Bassot, 2016). Practitioners have limited time to reflect due to their responsibility working in an early year setting to follow policies and support all children and families in their care (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). This means that practitioners could

reflect during their own time but they miss out parts of the experience or avoid reflecting which can affect their professional development and affecting the way they work with children and families (Kay, 2012). This means that it does not suit every situation when working in practice (Handbook of teaching and learning in medicine, 2009).

The cycle enables professionals to discover their preferred learning style and identify areas to improve in their process of learning (Sharlanova, 2004: Muscat and Mollicone, 2012). Kolb states that professionals discover their preferred learning style in a certain way and may need to use different learning styles during different experiences (Healey and Jenkins, 2000: Muscat and Mollicone, 2012). From professionals being open to use different learning styles during different situations, it allows them to be more flexible in their work which is beneficial to finding new methods, teamwork and discovering different approaches within practice. This can encourage change to the way professionals interact with each other, children and families to provide the best quality service to support their needs (Sharlanova, 2004: Sherdian et al, 2009). However, different learning styles may not suit all situations (Fook & Askelands, 2007), this means that professionals would have to use different approaches in different situations (Handbook of teaching and learning in medicine, 2009). Kolb mentions that for professionals to learn from an experience they must engage with each stage of the cycle, if professionals focus too much on the learning style during reflection this means that it will not fully enhance their learning (Bassot, 2016). However professionals may be reluctant to change due to being comfortable using their preferred learning style (Fleet et al, 2016). This can impact the way professionals work as part of a team which can influence on making improvements to practice, discovering different practices and literature to promote their knowledge and professional development; from this, it can have a negative impact on children and families they work with because they are not improving the service quality and not providing children and families the best support for them (Rawlings, 2008).

Kolb's cycle fails to acknowledge that emotions can impact on improving practice and developing self-awareness (Hayes et al, 2014). This suggests feelings are not important when reflecting on an experience and it can influence their behaviour and attitudes during practice, affecting the way they work (Hayes et al, 2014: Bassot,

2016), however Gibbs mentions the importance of them to learning and development in his cycle (Bassot, 2016).

Graham Gibbs (1988) cycle is an extension of Kolb's experiential cycle (Potter, 2015). Gibb's cycle has six stages which has more detailed directions in areas such as studying feelings, making sense of the experience and encourages people to focus closely on the experience (Johns, 2013: Kings College London, 2016). The stages for Gibbs cycle is description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan (Sicora, 2017). The aim of this cycle is to learn from an experience by challenging people's assumptions and feelings, identify strength and weaknesses, discover new ideas or approaches through different sources of information to support current knowledge and to create changes and an action plan to help make links between theory and practice (Kings College London, 2016: Husebo and Reagan, 2015).

Gibbs cycle provides a simple structure to promote critical reflection just like Kolb (Paterson and Chapman, 2013), but Gibbs had six stages to the cycle and provides more detailed questions that encourages professionals to go into a deeper reflection (Bruce, 2013: Sicora, 2017). Like Kolb, Gibbs mentions the importance of learning that happens through experiences (Bassot, 2016), by going through each stage of the cycle Gibbs believes it can provide insights to professional development and practice which can help individuals to gain new perspectives and develop an action plan for future development and learning (Bruce, 2013). The process of Gibbs reflection is presented as a cycle, this reminds professionals that the process is continuous which suggests that each experience we take part in provides the opportunity to new learning and development through further reflection (Bruce, 2013). However, the cycle is presented as a circle just like Kolb's and this was criticised as it suggested that each stage follows neatly after another (Bassot, 2016). Johns (2013) mentions reflection is a complex process, by presenting it in stages it can help professionals to understand how to reflect but showing the cycle follows neatly does not fit with the reality of practice. Also, because Gibbs cycle is simple, it has been described as superficial and possibly resulting in reflection not having much depth (Hayes et al, 2014: Husebo and Reagan, 2015).

Gibbs evaluation stage provides questions which encourage professionals to study what went well and did not go well during an experience (Sicora, 2017). Ghaye (2011 cited in Bassot, 2016) emphasises that professionals need to recognise what went well to build on these to enhance professional development and confidence as well as identifying what did not go well. Alongside this, identifying positive and negatives can help to recognise areas for improvement or change which can be helpful when professionals are making their action plan (Amzat and Valdez, 2017). However, professionals have a habit of focusing on negatives which leads to avoidance of reflection, impacting on development and practice (Grant et al, 2017). In the analysis stage Gibbs uses tentative wording, this can support professionals to make sense and think at a deeper level of an experience (Bassot, 2016). Studying different perspectives can join new knowledge with current knowledge to help improve and make changes to the service they provide for children and families (Bassot, 2016: Sicora, 2017). Gibbs conclusion stage allows professionals to analyse the situation and find out what else could have been done to make changes and move forward with their practice (Jasper, 2006: Amzat and Valdez, 2017). However, professionals could get confused with the evaluation, analyse and conclusion stages, Kings College London (2016) states that these parts of the cycle show a lot of repetition because they are asking similar questions. This can affect professional's knowledge and attitudes towards reflection, resulting in the process not being carried out effectively and having an impact on their knowledge and professional development which influences how they work with children and families (Hayes et al, 2014: Brock, 2015).

Unlike Kolb, Gibbs has a stage focused on feelings (Bassot, 2016). Gibbs believes that professionals should acknowledge their emotions because it develops their personal-awareness (Grant et al, 2017). By exploring their thoughts and emotions which can help gain more sense of an experience and identify the need for them to move on within the cycle, learning and development (Midwinter and Dickson, 2015: Grant et al, 2017). Bassot (2016) also mentions that involving emotions is an important part of professional development, it allows professionals to understand how to manage their emotions during the work (Bassot, 2016). Skipping this stage can have a negative impact on personal health, practice, other professionals, children and families. However, emotions can affect the way professionals work,

during different situations it can be challenging to control their emotions while remaining professional, this can affect the way they work with other professionals, children and families (Scales et al, 2011: Bassot, 2016). There may be a reluctance to carry out reflection due to it being a reminder of negative feelings and discomfort (Johns, 2013).

To conclude, reflection has many benefits to the development of personal and professional skills, it can have an impact on making changes to practice which can help to provide the best service for children and their families. Kolb and Gibbs cycles both have their strength and criticisms but they both help professionals by providing directions on how to reflect critically to enhance a professional's development, knowledge and practice.

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