

Reflective Practice: enhancing quality service provision in early years.

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"Without reflection, we go blindly on our own way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful."

(Wheatley, 2002, <https://margaretwheatley.com/articles/interconnected.html>)

Introduction

Professional practitioners in early years must understand the significance of reflective practice to facilitate their development in the workplace. Exploring a range of theorists, frameworks and models creates an awareness of how this can be applied. However, there needs to be an understanding of what is meant by reflective practice first and how its value should result in the improvement of the quality-of-service provision in the early years settings.

What is Reflection and Why is it Important?

According to Pollard et al (2014), effective practitioners reflect on their practise. They analyse themselves, their work, their colleagues, and the children's progress. They will think critically while challenging present beliefs with the intention of improving future practice. For example: What happened? How did it feel? What could be done differently?

Bassot (2016) expresses the importance of reflective practice by suggesting it deepens one's thinking. For example: taking time to question something could prevent future mistakes from happening. Furthermore, it can build on current strengths developing confidence as a practitioner. She argues that reflection influences self-awareness, gaining insight to the positive and negative qualities and the personal views and values that one brings to their practice, including courage to explore emotions and in doing so placing someone else's needs first. This is vital in early years because children's development is priority and practitioners should maximize learning opportunities to support their success. Reflection also supports the evaluation and development of practice due to constant review of actions, which allows room for insight on current knowledge; this supports a consistent growth in new skills, and all the while preventing stagnation in practise. Finally, reflective practice provides a means for constructive professional knowledge. Schon (1992) demonstrates this by exploring tacit knowing in action, suggesting practitioners know more than words can express, an intuition with experience, which supports decision making in practice. Reflection creates space for quality thinking which leads to quality practice, while constantly learning and growing as a professional through every experience. Schon believed it should be something everyone does throughout life.

Theoretical Frameworks and Models

McGreggor and Cartwright (2011) imply there is a range of guidance for what is expected as a professional practitioner in education; how and what should be taught and how to improve a child's development. They suggest there are varied frameworks and models which allow one to progress by simply making small changes with big impact. These small changes can create opportunities for major improvements in practice and reflective practice supports this.

According to Rushton and Suter (2012), reflecting on practice is a compelling way to combine theory with practice. It supports the practitioner in discovering what works well and helps them make good decisions based on an awareness of their knowledge and understanding after an experience has taken place. In agreement with Schon, they believe it should be a part of everyday life not just something we do occasionally. Let us unpack some of these theories on reflective practice that still impacts professionals today:

Schon

Brock (2014) outlines Schon's theory, suggesting he emphasized unity between practice, knowledge, and experience. Again, this is highlighted through tacit knowledge in action. This means practitioners are using intuition, they are thoughtful and unafraid to express emotion. This compliments knowledge and understanding and builds on actions and relationships. Reflection in action and, reflection on action is also demonstrated by exploring his views on how this method supports making sense of something that happened during or after an experience. Practitioners can critically analyse a situation, communicate, and decide how to make something better.

Dewy

Brock (2014) also considers Dewy's theory. He believed reflection is an additional element of people's thought process and that everyone should build on it by learning how to think effectively. He argues that reflection through thinking and organising thoughts, develops a better intellectual understanding. His theories encourage practitioners to explore problems and discover ways to fix them, identifying underlying beliefs and being open minded to ensure practice is not based on prejudice or outdated thinking.

Eraut

Brock (2014) delivers Eraut's approach to reflective practice. He believes knowledge and practice are intertwined, marrying theory to practice. He suggests this provides more depth to current understanding. He also argues that knowledge is developed through experience, which is determined by insights, beliefs, and intellectual understanding. He implies that reflecting on experiences and connecting them to personal knowledge is as important as professional and theoretical knowledge, suggesting practitioners who are highly trained and practitioners who learn on the job are equally valuable. Integrating all these factors can identify how to improve, enhance, and adjust something. He believes doing this alongside other's, influences many things. For example: effective listening and observation; feeling included and involved; flexibility in perspective; insight of knowledge and skill and gaining an awareness of other people's tacit knowledge.

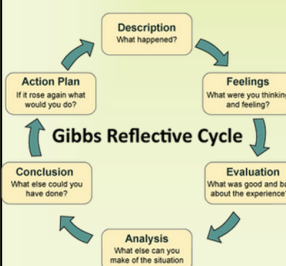
Kolbs

According to McGregor and Cartwright (2011), Kolb's theory to reflective practice is demonstrated through experiential learning. It relates to something physical and urges one to reflect. However, his theory suggests that even though there are concrete experiences and active experimentation, the reflective and observation process allows one to explore thoughts more broadly about the situation. For example: analysing through critical questioning which develops new learning onto current knowledge. Kolb's theory goes beyond thinking, it acts on what has been discovered and attempts something new that has been learned.

Reflective Cycle Model

Upon reflection of these theories, one can see how beneficial it can be to use reflective models in practice; let us explore the Gibbs (1988) model:

According to the University of Kent (2012), the Gibbs reflective cycle offers 6 stages to reflecting on practice, a strategy of which we gain knowledge about ourselves while making sense of the decisions we have made. This model influences critical evaluations, identify potential need for change and helps to develop further as a professional. The Gibbs model is effective because the process encourages a precise questioning approach which encourages a deeper analysis of oneself. For example: What happened? What did you think and feel about the experience? What are the negatives and positives? What else can be learned? What could have been done differently? And if it happened again, what would you do?



Source: University of Kent (2012)

Reflection and Early Years

The professional association for childcare and early years (2016), outlines the importance of a practitioner's role in delivering quality care for the young children in their settings. They suggest reflective practice is an exceptional way of maintaining and developing the service they provide; therefore, it is vital to learn the art of reflective practice.

According to Smith (2011), reflective practitioners in early year's must learn how to use theory and experience to reflect and improve their practice. She considers Schon's theory to reflection on action and reflection in action, suggesting this can be done by practitioners every day, moment by moment; suggesting practitioners' observations in those moments create significant relationships in the settings, for example: between colleagues, children, parents, and various partnerships involved with the setting. She argues that being aware and active in reflection means practitioners can explore themselves and their children's play in groups and individually while reflecting on those experiences. This can bring insightful perspectives, ideas, and thoughts about the experiences the children are engaged with and enable practitioners to see these moments through the eyes of a child. For example: If it is snack time in nursery and the usual routine is to sit in a circle on the carpet with a story, but the children learn it's snowing outside and begin to express excitement; reflecting in action may urge the practitioner to change the experience immediately. Perhaps they might ask the children to put their coats on and everyone enjoy snack outdoors, under the shelter instead while learning about the effects of winter. After the experience, a further discussion between the team may highlight further reflective points, for example: asking critical questions based on the Gibbs model mentioned above – What happened when the children went outside? Did they enjoy? Was it too cold? What did the practitioners think and feel about the experience?

How can reflection be introduced in an Early Year's Setting?

The professional association for childcare and early years (2016) suggest some practical ideas for reflective practice, however, they also highlight some barriers to be aware of. Time can be one and lack of understanding can be another. Practitioners should create purposeful time to set aside for reflection, whether that be in groups, 1:1 or independently. They should also explore and discover the right tools to make their reflections effective:

Yearly Appraisals

According to the Faculty of Public Health (2020), appraisals with supervisors is beneficial to one's continual professional development. Taking time to discuss and take valuable notes reflecting on the previous year supports everyone in learning and growing, resulting in more valuable and effective practitioners. It provides evidence of dedication to progress and growth in their role, for example: One might have achieved further training that year. It can also bring insight to how one wishes to progress the following year, for example: further training. They suggest that CPD encourages a professional to maintain and develop standards by reflecting on the ways one can grow in knowledge, abilities, mindsets and actions and appraisals supports this.

Reflective Diaries

As a professional practitioner this could be a practical way to reflect personally and a good starting point. Vinjamuri, Warde and Kolb (2017) suggests that frequent reflective diary writing brings depth to thought. Practitioners can view a situation with curiosity, investigation and debate, firmly contemplating emotions, responses, ideas, and beliefs. They can critically analyse oneself and identify decisions that must be made or discussed. Diary writing allows one to revisit, re evaluate and discover ideas and perspectives. They can link new knowledge with personal value and past experiences. Anything relevant can then be shared with colleagues.

Group Reflection

Bold (2008) discusses in her article that peer support groups influence a deeper approach to learning. When engaging in reflective discussions and debates, it brings insight to different perspectives through analysing and exploring a situation. This has a bigger impact on the knowledge and understanding that can be gained and the decisions that need to be made. Practitioners have varied roles and responsibilities and taking time to reflect together in the setting, creates space for engaging in meaningful communications that can benefit everyone involved, most importantly the children's progress. She suggests different tools to support peer support, for example: reflective records and informal diaries.

Peer Observation and Feedback

The professional association for childcare and early years (2016) suggests that peer observation is an effective way to reflect on everyone's practice providing constructive feedback to each other suggesting strengths and weaknesses. The aim is to discover how to develop going forward. They argue it can help if less experienced practitioners observe more experienced practitioners by gaining knowledge and understanding, while more experienced practitioners can learn new ideas from less experienced practitioners.

Source: National Day Nurseries Association (2019)



Workshops

Tan, Cashell and Bolderston (2012), suggests a productive workshop can positively impact practitioners' knowledge and understanding of the importance of reflection in the workplace. They highlight that reflection influences the best approaches for moving forward by evaluating oneself and challenging current actions. Their view implies that many people don't know how to reflect well, lacking skills to do it effectively. This opinion supports PACEY (2016) who suggests lack of understanding is a barrier to reflecting effectively. They strongly suggest that if there are workshops that focus on teaching what reflection is and how to reflect well, it would enable a practitioner to improve by first understanding the importance of reflection and encouraging them to participate and increase their level of reflection in the workplace.

Reflective Accounts Form

According to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2021), a reflective accounts form is used by practitioners to refer to either of the following: their own continuous professional development; feedback based on professional practice or an event that has taken place during practice. They suggest these accounts must relate to the code, which is the standards that practitioners must uphold to remain in active practice. There are 4 subjects surrounding those standards and it is implied that when considering what to write, these subjects have extreme importance. Firstly, people must be the priority, secondly, practice must be effective, thirdly, maintaining safety is vital and finally, encouraging and supporting professionalism and trust in the workplace is fundamental. The reflective accounts form is an excellent way to reflect because it can include what knowledge has been gained and how they have altered or developed their practice by linking it back to the code.

Conclusion

To conclude, it must be remembered that having a good understanding of the significance of reflective practice is a fundamental element to professional development. Considering what happened and how to improve while analysing one's own actions, feelings, and thoughts and those of fellow colleagues, allows room for quality service. As a result, this leads to exceptional outcomes for the practitioner, colleagues, families, the wider community and most importantly, the child.

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