

Reflective practice in the early years

What is reflection and reflective practice in early years

The university of Cambridge (no date) describe reflective practice as the opportunity to go back in time to re live the experience, to look at what happened and to change it or repeat it in the future, reflective practice is the opportunity to learn from experience to inform future practice. Lindon (2012) states that reflective practice is for everyone, and that reflection is a vital skill to ensure best practice in the early years. Reflection can be traced as far back as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle but has become a modern necessity for the professional practitioner. If reflection is to have a purpose it needs to have meaning and therefore needs to relate to early years practice (Brock, 2015).

Why should we reflect in practice?

Reflection can be used in all areas of life to help plan for the future, it can help a student plan to reach their goals, help a person move on from an experience, aid in personal development or help to support the development of a provision (University of Cambridge, no date).

Brock (2015) explains that reflective practice is essential for a person to become a professional practitioner, reflection is utilised during training and called upon during everyday practice to ensure appropriate provision is in place for young learners. Reflection is also a useful tool in self-evaluation and continued professional development.

Page-Smith and craft (2011) state that sharing views on an activity can be very beneficial especially in multi-agency situations where each practitioner can reflect from a different viewpoint and believes through being reflective, a practitioner may change the way they think and therefore improve their practice.

Overcoming challenges

Having the motivation to reflect is an important first step, practitioners must be aware of the reasons and benefits of reflective practice (Tarrant, 2017). Often reflection involves revisiting things that the practitioner already knows in depth, however if they understand that the process of reflection initiated by them is also for their benefit then the process of professional reflection may be less challenging. Through peer-to-peer reflection, such as taking a moment to talk to a colleague in the staff room, a practitioner can step back from the perceived formality of reflection and achieve reflective practice in a more informal way. Utilising group reflection a practitioner can build on their own reflective skills but also help support other practitioners to do the same, reflecting as a group may also give the practitioner a viewpoint or a solution they would not have otherwise considered (Tarrant, 2017). Tarrant suggests using a question bank to facilitate actively assisting reflective practice, these can provide structure and help to initiate conversation. It is then important that the practitioner actively listens to their colleague with a positive and non-judgemental attitude. There may be times where reflection feels impossible, this can include time where what is being reflection on triggers big emotions or time where the practitioner feels like they have done their bit and nothing can be gained from reflecting, during these times it is important the practitioner remembers that the process of reflection will not only benefit their practice but them as a practitioner, by revisiting theories of reflection, reflective models and tools and seeking support from colleagues, these barriers can be overcome (Tarrant, 2017)

John Dewey

Davis and Waller (2014) state that theories of reflective practice can be dated back to Dewey in 1933. Dewey believed that reflection was an extra layer of thought that a person needs to actively build upon. To understand what has happened a person needs to look back at what has been done. Dewey believed that it is not the event that informs a person but reflecting on that event. By reflecting and using the information gained a person achieves a deeper understanding and thus has a basis for their beliefs and values (Brock, 2015).

Dewey's (1933, cited in Davis and Waller 2014) reflective practice theory explains that practitioner cannot rely on things to always happened in the same way and that there is more than one way to achieve something. Dewey believed that practitioners must reflect on their practice, problem solve and adapt to find an approach that works. Dewey's theory describes revisiting every area of practice in the mind and analysing it to form a more holistic approach.

Donald Schon's theory of reflective practice

Schön and Argyris' (1974, cited in Lindon, 2012) book 'Theory in practice' formed the basis for Schön's well know theory on reflective practice. The focus of their work was that many people weren't aware of the discrepancies in practice and that there was disparity between what was thought to happen day to day and what did take place. Schön and Argyris' theory was that more understanding of these disparities would improve practice and that the 'maps' that people use in action are not necessarily the same ones they use to plan or review their actions.

Schön's (1983, cited in Lindon, 2012) later published theory focused on two ideas of reflection, one that happens during and event and one that happens after. Schön realised that some practitioners thought that overthinking an action could be detrimental to practice, however Schon believed this to be flawed but acknowledged this could be a barrier to effective reflection. Schon's theory of reflective practice included reflection in practice and reflection on Practice.

Reflection in action - Page Smith and Craft (2011) describe reflection in action as thinking in the moment. Reflecting in action can often be a reaction to something that has happened unexpectedly, this may be a positive or negative experience but one that the practitioner may not have foreseen. However, over time this reflection may cease as the practitioner becomes absorbed in routine and repetition, it is important therefore for the practitioner to also reflect on action whilst they are in action. Reflection in action can provide the tools for practitioner to cope in difficult situations, where thought and action are not sperate but work together to establish the next course of action (Pollard, 2014). A reflective practitioner can not only reflect with purpose on a predetermined question but also reflect in action on the unexpected to ensure a child centred provision (Page-Smith and craft, 2011)

Reflection on action - Lindon (2012) explains that this kind of reflection can take place before or after an event. Although reflection is usually thought of as something that happens as a way of looking back at something that has previously occurred it can also be of benefit as a planning tool for something that will occur. Reflection can be done alone or as part of bigger group of people, they may have been part of the event or be part of a multi-agency approach supporting a practitioner to reflect on and improve their practice. There are many techniques which can assist with reflecting on action, such as reflective models which can be a step-by-step guide to effective reflection.

Introducing reflection to early years practice

PACEY (2016) provide suggestions of practical tools for reflecting in early years settings, one suggestion is to use a reflection diary, in this diary a practitioner can record their personal development, thoughts and feelings and reflect upon experiences, this can be revisited over time and may be helpful to support and develop reflective practice. It can be beneficial to keep a copy of a reflexive model in this diary. PACEY also provide examples of reflecting in practice and how these reflections can be used to influence best practice.

PACEY explain that in a situation of settling in a new child to a setting the practitioner must consider their procedure for this. Next, thinking about that procedure, how do they go about achieving this? Does the child and their carer feel happy, safe and supported? How is the practitioner ensuring they feel this way? What can be done to reinforce this?

Having reflected on practice, SMART targets can now be used to aid professional development in the areas that have been identified during the reflection process.

Specific -What needs to be done?

Measurable – How can it be proven that this has been achieved?

Achievable – Is this possible? What can be put in place to help achieve this?

Relevant – Will this support practice or aid professional development?

Time – When should this be done by? Is this once off?

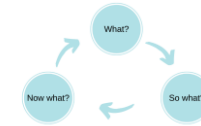
Continued professional development is a vital part of reflective practice, there are many tools which can help to support this. Below is the Nursing and Midwifery council's (no date) reflective accounts form, although the form is aimed at practicing nurses as part of the revalidation process it is a useful tool which can be adapted for early years practitioners. The form asks the practitioner to identify moments of continued professional development, these could relate to personal reading, a course or an experience in practice. The practitioner then moves on to reflect on what they learnt in these moments, how this affected the practitioners practice and how this relates to 'the code' of practice. This in early years could be national minimum standards or the four purposes in the Curriculum for Wales.

Source: Nursing and midwifery council

Reflective models

Reflection on action can be described as Looking back at what happened (Page-Smith and craft, 2011) There are numerous reflective models which can help to support reflective practice.

Driscoll's What Model



Source: university of Cambridge

The University of Cambridge (No date) introduce this as a simple model first developed by Driscoll in 1994, through asking 3 questions the practitioner can reflect on the event and gain knowledge to take forward.

The 3 steps of this model are –

What? – What was the situation, the setting, or the activity? What happened? This brings context to the reflection

So what? – What was learned from this? What was the result of this? How did this impact those involved?

Now What? – Does anything need to change? Can things be put in place in future to prevent this from happening again or to ensure it does? What can be done to improve on this?

Gibbs' reflective cycle



Source: University of Edinburgh

According to the university of Edinburgh (2020), Gibbs' reflective cycle is one of the most well-known models for reflection. This model works well in experience that are repeated often although can also be used for one off events.

The 5 steps of this model are –

Description – Describe the situation, what happened, bring context to the reflection.

Feeling – How did feeling impact on this situation, what were the feelings of the practitioner and others before, during and after the experience.

Evaluation - What went well? What didn't work so well?

Analysis – Why did this happen? Why didn't think work out or why did this work well?

Conclusion – What has been learnt? What could have been done differently?

Action Plan – In future how can I change this? What can be improved on to ensure success next time?

Conclusion

In conclusion, reflective practice is a vital skill for early years practitioners which supports professional development and promotes best practice. Through understanding the principles of reflective theory and using reflective models as a guide, practitioners can improve professional practice by identifying areas to develop on, understanding why this change or improvement is necessary and then implementing this in practice. There are many tools and guides available for practitioners wishing to develop their reflection skills and support the journey to best practice.

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