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Reflective practice for the Early years Practitioners

What is reflective practice?

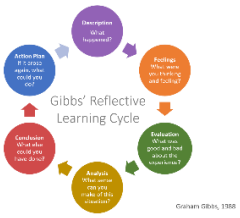
Reflection and Reflective practice are a way practitioners can improve provision and own practice within their workplace. (Reed 2008, states in Hallet 2013, p, 26) Reflection provides a process for practitioners to change the landscape in which they work, the ability to reflect and challenge existing ways of working, through reading, discussing with others, thinking about theory, research and how these relate to and inform practice. This is linking to what the practitioner already knows, reflection on new material and further processing of new ideas. It can be a process of reorganizing new knowledge gained and breaking them down into categories. This can be useful for the practitioner to fully understand what was learnt during reflection. To generate thinking and to improve practice, the early year's practitioner can be asking themselves questions such as "To provide good quality provision what needs to be encompassed to develop more understanding and skills?" These types of questions can be beneficial when continuously used within reflective practice, they can remain ongoing and be integrated with what practitioners do every day and not part of a temporary exercise. Schon 1976 states that the ability to reflect on action is necessary in order to engage in a process of continuous learning and that this is a crucial characteristic in professional practice. Schon believes in the theory of knowledge-in-action and knowledge-on-action, which are making sense of an action in everyday practice whilst doing something and after they have done it.

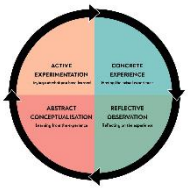
Models for reflective practice

For many practitioners to help them reflect on their experiences and learn from them. A simple reflective model to use as a guide can be helpful. The Gibbs reflective model is one of the most famous examples created in 1988 by Professor Graham Gibbs. It was designed to help the practitioner learn what went well and what could have gone better during their reflection process. If any weaknesses are highlighted, this model can be a useful way to address and set out an action plan. It offers a framework covering six stages starting with description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and lastly action plan. The model builds on three and adds more stages.
Another example that can be useful within reflective practice is the Kolb's experimental learning cycle created by theorist David Allen Kolb in 1984. This theory is typically made up of a four-stage cycle including - concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and finally active experimentation. Kolb believes that effective learning is achieved when a person progresses through each of these stages. Kolb explains that each stage can be entered at any time and then followed through the sequence. However, to maximise learning it must be executed throughout all four stages as one stage on its own would not be enough. This allows the transformation of the experience to knowledge to then occur. The whole theory is based on the person to be able to pass through each stage converting learning into the knowledge gained. With each new experience, new observations can be integrated with current understanding.

The images below show the two most popular models created to help guide with reflection.

Source: H, Martin 2021





Source:Simplypyschology 2017

Each model takes a slightly different approach. These different models will suit each practitioner for different reasons and their own preferences. Reflection is almost always a personal process and as a professional practitioner taking time to try each approach that works best for them and the different circumstances at the time of reflection will have a better outcome. It is important that the process works well, and if it does not try another method. Although reflective models are a great place for an individual to start thinking about their reflection and offer a good structure to follow. There can also be some negatives to using them, these should be kept in mind when approaching any model. Such as, models may not apply in every situation and how reflective practice is a continuous process. Think about ... Which model? Think about the models outlined above. Do any of them appeal to you or have you found another model which works for you? Do you find models in general helpful or are they too restrictive? (University of Cambridge, 2022).

Reflection in the Early years setting

Costley 2011 states that Reflection is an integrated part of work-based learning. Reflection enables an individual practitioner to reflect upon their daily work and learn from it. Reflection enables organisations to change and develop through collective reflection (Boud and Soloman, 2003). A setting or service should support and provide suitable conditions where group reflection can be carried out, where openness and trust can be informally and formally discussed at staff meetings. To have a comfortable space to chat and offer reflective thoughts is an example of staff having these reflective opportunities to contribute their insights on reflective practice. Such opportunities and spaces give everyone a collective response to build on learning. Reflective practice provides individual or group change, development for the self and for an early years setting, school or service (Cairns and Malloch, 2011). Engaging in reflective conversations allows the practitioner together as a team, to all critically think through ideas discussed and to then put them all into practice. For a newly qualified practitioner or student observing or participating in the reflective process can be very beneficial. As these practitioners will be expected to be able to reflect and answer questions with their mentor at given times. Therefore, being given opportunities to be included in reflective practice and the process to then be modelled by colleagues ensures that they understand the reflection always goes somewhere. This shows it is a crucial part of all staff working with children on why they are undertaking reflection and why it's used. That it is not only a requirement for those working towards a qualification but that it is set within one's professional role and that it is part of continual development for anyone working in a setting. Encouraging students to become effective reflective practitioners within their work setting early on in their professional careers. Early years practitioners continually using their professional experience and knowledge during everyday sessions, will subsequently improve provision for children and their families. Observation sheets to record and plan information gained can be helpful in documenting the reflection process. It is important to record the necessary information and can be used as a guide and adapted to the setting. Identifying how practitioners observe in the setting and how it can be used effectively. This can be used as a visual when discussing any issues with parents or carers and an opportunity for them to share or add anything to the form. Thus, allowing them to be part of the plan and support with their child's development. This is always good practice within the practitioner's role. With the use of this sort of document, it will aid in gathering information during practice on children's learning and be used to explore with other professionals alongside parents/carers using a multi-agency approach. Such communication must take due care regarding privacy, children's rights and ethics to minimise any possible risks. According to Lumsden (2005), the 'embracing' of other professionals, children, young people and their families is essential to developing shared meanings and to working in collaboration. The implication is that it is the relationships between individual practitioners that will ultimately determine the success or failure of multi-agency working.

Reflection for the Early year's practitioner

For the individual reflective practitioner, one needs to be not only aware of own perspectives but to be open to others opinions. To ensure to embark on reflective practice as not only on oneself and own work but as part of a team and the way both are providing quality provision, and where there may be ways this can be improved. Critically thinking together and reflecting on how children interact together, and how we as practitioners respond and interact with them is vital in seeing children's development. When practitioners are working alongside each other there will be opportunities to share points of views and to compare these thoughts and how to approach them. This can provide more insights in everyday practice. Tarrant suggests that in order for reflection to be effective it needs to be at a certain level to be self-initiated. To have a sense of ownership for the person doing the reflecting, enabling more honesty and openness. Looking at seeking any changes needed and growth within own learning. When there is no fear of criticism and judgement from other team members it is more likely that taking action where highlighted will take place, and changes that are needed can be made. However, it is not always enough to think how changes can be made to make things better, but is it important to articulate how the reflection will impact upon practice. Reflections should be articulated in order to move from tacit and unconscious knowing, to more conscious knowing. It is this consciousness that enables reflection to become the catalyst for change. Yet it is the articulation of the reflection that makes it more tangible and enables one to be more aware of it. (Suggested by Ghaye and Ghaye ,1998 quoted in Tarrant 2017, p. 44). Schon's theory provides emphasis on this for when thinking about reflective practice in early years' settings. He claims that even whilst making conscious use of different theories and other techniques. A person's tacit knowledge, recognition and judgements are where one is most dependant on. He believes the process of refection-in-action is how practitioners deal well with uncertain situations or value conflict. Reflecting-in-action ~ If common sense recognizes knowing- in-action, it also recognizes that we sometimes think about what we are doing. Phrases like 'thinking on your feet' and 'keeping your wits about you' suggest not only that we can think about doing but that we can think about doing something while doing it. (Quoted in Schon,1992, p.54) However, there are often barriers to change due to resistance from other practitioners or other various reasons. These could be due to attitudes or values. But, taking the time to stop, reflect on what to do and make informed decisions about the best way forward, should always be with children's best interest at the forefront.

To conclude

From all points suggested, is that there are many methods to support reflective practice to facilitate professional development in the early year's workforce. Reflection works best when it is genuine and self-initiated. When it shows a purpose and has significance. Developing good learning conversations in a safe professional environment is where true reflection can take place. Where there are no interruptions or judgements, it becomes a supportive place for reflective practice. This process of talking and reflecting becomes good practice in the everyday work routine and should be an integral part of professional practice not seen as 'one offs'. Practitioners working every day in an early years setting will understand how reflection is key to identifying problems or difficult situations that occur. That certain changes quite often will need to be made during or after sessions, and how another way of working should be explored to suit the needs of the children and the setting. Even slight adaptations for children's needs can be provided. Reflection gives the practitioner time to process plans to ensure the best possible care and learning experiences can be given to children whilst gaining own professional development.

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