

EDITORIAL

Reflective practice: experiential learning in the early years

Reflective practice is a vital aspect of working with young children and enables a deeper understanding of their learning and development. It is the key to quality improvement and enables the early years practitioners to articulate and understand their own practice in greater depth, exploring some ways in which they can be encouraged to engage in reflecting on their practice. Reflective practice is the focus of this rich collection of papers. The authors shed light on a range of early years practice, highlighting some of the pedagogical factors that shape practitioners' understanding of their own practice and their influence on children's lives.

In our first paper, Degotardi, Sweller and Pearson (2013) consider 'Why relationships matter: parent and early childhood teacher perspectives about the provisions afforded by young children's relationships'. This large-scale study of 200 parents and 71 teachers of children aged 0–5 indicates differences in the value attached to a range of relational indicators which are thoroughly interrogated in the study. Interestingly, despite claims that teachers tend to focus on achievement, the authors note that teachers and parents value equally the many social, emotional and pedagogical functions that can be realised through the teacher–child relationship.

The next paper 'Active engagement, emotional impact and changes in practice arising from a residential field trip' (RFT) by Gilbert et al. (2013) examines students' experiences of a residential trip to Sweden as part of their Early Childhood Studies degree. Sweden is offered as an alternative perspective to challenge and develop the students' existing knowledge and understanding of pedagogy and practice. The authors conclude that this active learning experience led the student/practitioners to re-evaluate their traditional pedagogic roles and the way they relate to children, and then to consider how their RFT experience led them to re-conceptualise their practice in more child-centred terms.

Our third paper by Payler and Georgeson (2013) offers an important insight into the factors that enrich the early years experience of children with special educational needs (SEN). More specifically, Payler and Georgeson (2013) examines the participation of early years staff in interprofessional practice to provide education for children with SEN. Informed by Social Practice Theory, a total of 16 interviews were conducted in five outstanding early years settings. Acknowledging the collective influences of culture, history and the social context on personal identity and practice (Holland and Lave 2009), Social Practice Theory explores differences between individuals and institutional practices. Payler concludes that in settings with a successful history and secure funding, even less-experienced and lower-qualified staff will share the potential for collaborative action and influence. However, the quality of interprofessional practice is influenced by a collective rather than an individualistic approach.

In the fourth paper in this edition Emilson and Johansson (2013) explore participatory values in relation to gender in two countries: Norway and Sweden. Their theoretical framework combines Habermas' concepts of strategic and communicative actions and Davies' idea of duality. A contemporary theorist, Habermas, posits that individuals seek to achieve a common understanding through reasoned argument. At the same time, Davies' concepts which position males in opposition to females were employed to inform the analysis and interpretation of the data. Six groups of children ($n=121$, 56 boys and 65 girls) and 40 teachers participated in the study which involved video observations of teacher and child interactions in circle-time situations. The authors' note that participation is conditional on the child's willingness to become involved in the activity, girls are more active than boys and that boyish behaviour is the accepted norm against which girls' behaviour is interpreted. Findings are discussed in terms of the value placed on masculine and feminine behaviour.

The next article by Jopling, Whitmarsh, and Hadfield (2013) presents evidence that challenges assumptions that childhood poverty no longer affects children in developed countries. They note that 50% of children from socially disadvantaged areas experience speech language and communication skills (SLC) delays that affect their literacy attainment, problem solving and social outcomes on school entry. To address the problems a number of early interventions have been developed. Jopling and his colleagues report findings from an evaluation of one SLC programme entitled *Early Talk* (ET) introduced into 14 Sure Start Children's centres across five regions in England. The ET programme was designed by the *I Can* national UK charity which supports communication among children and young people. Findings were positive. An interesting aspect of this paper is the reportage of difficulties encountered by the research team and their solutions to mishaps.

The issue of childhood poverty is explored in greater depth in the penultimate paper in this edition by Simpson (2013) entitled 'Remediating child poverty via pre-school: exploring practitioners' perspectives in England', which examines pre-school practitioners' understandings about child poverty. Employing a qualitative approach, the authors provide a rare insight into the experiences of pre-school practitioners working in the poorest region of England. Their assumptions about their role within policy discussions and debates about child poverty are also explored. Findings indicate a separation between the rhetoric of the child poverty strategy and the reality of the contexts in which pre-school practitioners work.

The final article in this edition offers a departure from the practitioner focus and places children centre stage. In 'Are we allowed to blink? Young children's leadership and ownership while mediating interactions around technologies', Arnott (2013) focuses on children's social interactions around technologies in pre-school. From a young age children are introduced to a wide range of interactive technological artefacts including digital and video cameras, audiocassettes, video/DVD, internet, mobile phone, e-mail, programmable toys and robots, musical keyboards, activity centres, digital interactive TV, children's websites, remote controlled toys, washing machines, metal detectors, digital weighing machines and cash registers. In contrast to claims that technologies are solitary resources (Cordes and Miller 2000), Arnott (2013) identifies factors that shape children's social engagement in contemporary technology-rich pre-schools.

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