The importance of reflective practice as a professional practitioner

2206980 ECEY4002 Word count: 1886

What is reflective practice and why do we reflect?

It is suggested that today in the ever-evolving world of early years provision, practitioners are required to be up to date with training and qualifications to ensure they are providing the best possible environment to ensure that children and young people have an inspiring, healthy and confident start to lifelong learning. An emerging trend in recent years, although not a new topic in itself, is the art of reflection and reflective practice (Hallet 2013). This paper aims to provide practitioners with a guide to understanding the theory and developing the skills recommended when reflecting on practice.

Boyd and Fales (1983) suggests that:

> *Reflective learning is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective.*

Reflection is an activity that practitioners may come to use every day, they might adapt activities as they are happening, they could change their approach and style of communication as a conversation evolves (Schon 2007, as quoted in Hallet 2013). Successful practitioners should also be able to look back and reflect on a particular event with focus and purpose ensuring their practices and those of others are continually reviewed and improved. Johns (2013) states that being a reflective practitioner is to be mindful of one's practices and approaches either during an event or when looking back. Schon (1983, as quoted in Myers 2013) similarly states that reflection should be focused and critical, a reflective practitioner should be able to look back at an event and question and scrutinise their own biases and prejudices to empower them to make balanced, well-informed decisions on how to improve their own practices and those within a setting. Brock (2014) argues that reflection is about analysis, the assessment of a particular problem or issue from different viewpoints, it is a skill that might be utilised and honed by professional practitioners to help improve their critical awareness and develop their understanding, thereby ensuring continual improvement for the children and families they support and work with and the wider community around them.

Through reflection, practitioners become more aware of themselves, more able to identify their strengths and the areas of improvement and development needed (Tarrant 2013). Fullan (2007, as quoted in Tarrant 2013) argues that, in order for a professional practitioner to improve, they need to measure oneself and be open about what they do, reflecting is a technique that should be used to facilitate and demonstrate this learning.

The theory of reflection and reflective practices.

Dewey (1933, as quoted in Pollard 2014, p68) argues that reflection is important to professional development through routinised and reflective teaching. The routinised method of thinking is described as that of trial and error, the act of trying out new methods or concepts during teaching activities and interaction with others. The reflective teaching comes when a practitioner feels the need to revisit an incident or event that is felt to be incomplete, or the outcome of an event is unclear. He describes five stages to follow during reflective experiences. The doubt and possible confusion regarding the outcome of a situation, followed by a conjectural anticipation, a tentative look at the outcome and a superficial probe into what aspects need addressing and why. This stage is followed by a careful survey where the practitioner examines, explores and analyses in depth to clarify and define where improvement or change is needed. The consequent elaboration of the hypothesis, the changes a person believes are the correct ones to improve, and finally putting the hypothesis, or ideas, developed in the previous steps into action and ultimately put to the test.

Schon (2007, as stated in Hallet 2013) developed the concept of a reflective practitioner, a person who will reflect upon their experience. He believes that there are two processes through which a professional may reflect, reflection in action and reflection on action. Professionals may reflect during an activity, reflecting in action, whether it be a task set in the classroom, an activity outdoors or a conversation with a colleague or parent. They should be able to assess how a situation is developing and changing focus or tact, if needed, as the event is happening. They may do this by drawing on prior knowledge and learning to adapt to developing situations. They may change their behaviour, approach or elements of the task, at the time, thereby demonstrating reflecting in action. Schon argues that the act of reflection in action is spontaneous and intuitive (1983, as stated in Pollard 2014, p71). The act of reflection on action is the task of looking deeper into an event, a practitioner may plan and carry out an activity with the intention and purpose of reviewing the activity in-depth at a later time or date. Reflecting on practice allows a practitioner to assess, analyse and improve one's practices, linking practice to theory and assessing and identifying areas in need of improvement and the steps needed to implement those ideas. (Schon 2007, as quoted in Hallet 2013).

Reflection in the Early Years Setting

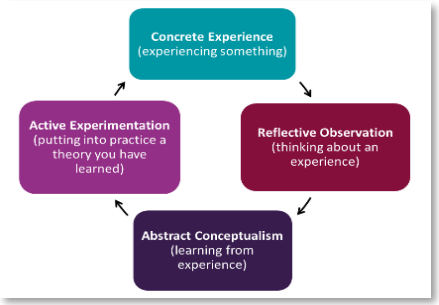
Wilson (2016) believes that reflective practice is the review of experience, however, this is only a start to describing the techniques and the steps needed to really understand what is going on in any given situation, what is working and what needs re-evaluating. Wilson uses Moon's (2009) technique of the Graduated Scenario to apply the theory of reflection to practice. This allows the practitioner to look back at an event several times, each time allowing their observations and reflections to broaden on each recount. For example, on first looking back on an event, a person takes note of what they believed happened, examining why this event needs to be revisited, what were their actions or reactions? What issues they identified as needing addressing? On a second reflection, examining the views and opinions of others, how they perceived the event, their opinions and advice on how to improve future outcomes. On a third reflection, examining and deciding what actions could be taken to improve own practice and that of others to the benefit of everyone within the setting.

Gibbs model of reflection

In 1988, Gibbs developed his Reflection cycle to demonstrate the techniques that practitioners should use to reflect on their practices, the cycle includes six steps for effective reflection and can be applied to repetitive situations or single events, the cycle also allows for different depths of reflection depending on time allotted and desired outcomes (University of Edinburgh 2010).

The six stages are as follows:
Description, what event or incident is being revisited, **Feelings**, the thoughts and feelings of those involved, **Evaluation**, both positive and negative and without prejudice or bias, **Analysis**, to help understand what occurred, **Conclusion**, the lessons learnt from the event and how things could have been done differently and **Action Plan**, implement any necessary changes and plan how to navigate a similar situation in the future as a result of the previous steps being taken.

University of Leeds 2020



University of Hull 2022

Kolb (1984) cycle of reflection

Kolb developed his cycle of reflection to guide professionals in their reflective practices, it was designed to help them learn from their experiences through reflective writing or as a guide on how to structure and evaluate thoughts.

The guide has four stages, firstly, Concrete Evidence, this refers to the thing a person has experienced or possibly an aspect of something that has occurred. Secondly, Reflective Observation, this stage requires a person to look back on the event from their own point of view, their feelings and thoughts at the time and how that interacts and connects to prior knowledge and skills. Thirdly, Abstract Conceptualism, here a practitioner must evaluate their reflection, explain why they have come to that conclusion and acknowledge what went well and what needs improving, also highlighting areas for future exploration for present or future reflections. Lastly, Active Experimentation, this is where you build a plan based on your reflective findings for future events, ensuring that your actions can be measured and achievable, this links back to the first stage by moving forward and gaining new experiences building on the lessons learnt from this reflection cycle.

Reflective Practice in action

The professional practitioner should use reflective practice to improve the learning experiences and the setting environment for the children they work with, they can achieve this through building on and reflecting on existing knowledge and develop and improve that knowledge through education and continual professional development (Brock 2014). Work based reflective learning is the idea that professional practitioners develop their reflective practices through work-based experiences. A setting should provide support and the right conditions to allow and stimulate their workforce to work collaboratively on reflective practices, designating time for informal and formal reflective sessions, maybe partnering up less and more experienced staff to assist and encourage a practitioner through mentoring systems and providing comfortable, relaxing environments such as a welcoming staffroom to encourage reflective opportunities (Hallet 2013).

The General Council for Northern Ireland (GTC NI) (2007, as quoted in Pollard 2014) gives an example of the standards expected of practitioners and the core values that each should uphold and demonstrate, the GTC NI highlights the importance of being reflective and learning through different dimensions, making use of experiences to develop different approaches and increase capacity for self-criticism and self-development. Putting reflective theories into action is to help continually create the best provision possible for early years children. It is an integral part of being a successful and effective professional practitioner, The theories discussed above could be put into practice in several ways within a setting, using a reflective journal, discussing and revisiting a situation with a colleague or mentor to help clarify thoughts and gain insight from a new perspective. The consistent documenting of a child's progress in their portfolios, making note of any observations to help build a wider understanding of each individual and maybe link previous experiences to identify trends. By reflecting on how children react to an activity, Was it successful? Did they engage? What could be done to improve the activity in the future? Does it need to be differentiated or adapted for specific Children?

Conclusion

Reflective practice is a skill that every early years practitioner should develop to continually improve and challenge procedures within a setting, (Farrelly 2010). To be a successful practitioner, capable of creating and sharing in the joys of working within the early sector, reflective practice is a skill that is of upmost importance. Appleby (2010, as quoted in Hallet 2013, p126) believes that *"reflective practice is a never-ending journey involving personal and professional qualities and attributes".* It is a journey that some may find easier to navigate than others but, is a journey that all practitioners should take to ensure that they provide the best quality provisions. As a practitioner develops and grows in confidence and knowledge, the thoughts and reflection techniques described in this paper used should become an everyday task that will enrich the experiences of the children within the setting and encourage continual professional development to enable the early years provision to adapt and evolve as required.

References

Alasuutari, M. *et al.* (2014) *Assessment and Documentation in Early Childhood Education*. London: Taylor & Francis Group. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [7 October 2022].

Boyd, E. M., & Fales, A. W. (1983). 'Reflective Learning: Key to Learning from Experience'. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* 23(2), pp. 99–117. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167883232011

Brock, A 2014, The Early Years Reflective Practice Handbook, Taylor & Francis Group, London. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [13 October 2022].

Children's Commissioner for Wales (no date). About Us: Powers UNCRC resources [video]. Available at: The Children's Commissioner for Wales - About Us (childcomwales.org.uk) (Accessed on 24 October 2022).

Dunhill, A, Elliott, B and Shaw, A. (2010) *Effective Communication and Engagement with Children and Young People, Their Families and Carers*. Exeter: Learning Matters (Creating Integrated Services Series). Available at: https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=411650&site=ehost-live (Accessed: 21 October 2022).

Early years coalition (no date). *Birth to 5 matters, Observation, assessment and planning.* Available at: Observation, assessment and planning – Birth To 5 Matters (Accessed on 21 October 2022).

Early Years Workforce Commission (2021). *A workforce in crisis: Saving our early years*. Available at: a-workforce-in-crisis-saving-our-early-years.pdf (pacey.org.uk) (Accessed on 18 October 2022).

Education Wales (2022). *A curriculum for funded non-maintained settings.* Available at: A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (gov.wales) (Accessed on 24 October 2022).

Farrelly, P. (2010) *Early Years Work-Based Learning*, Working with Children, Young People and Families LM Series, Learning Matters, Exeter [U.K.], viewed 7 October 2022, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=411655&site=ehost-live

Gasper, M. (2015). Professional practice and early childhood today. In M. Reed, & R. Walker A critical companion to early childhood (pp. 254-268). SAGE Publications, Inc., https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473910188.n22

Hallet, E. (2013) *The Reflective Early Years Practitioner*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=775831&site=ehost-live (Accessed: 13 October 2022).

Jarvis, P, George, J and Holland, W. (2013). *The Early Years Professional's Complete Companion* (2nd ed.). Harlow, England: Pearson

Johns, & Burnie, S. (2013). *Becoming a reflective practitioner* (4th ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Legislation.go.uk (no date). *Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.* Available at: Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 (legislation.gov.uk) (Accessed on 24 October 2022).

Llywodraeth Cymru, Welsh Government (2021). *Early years outcomes: framework.* Available at: Early years outcomes: framework (gov.wales) (Accessed on 18 October 2022).

Ministry of Education, (2017). *The Whariki*. Available at: ELS-Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf (education.govt.nz) (Accessed on 24 October 2022).

Murray, J., (2013) ‘Becoming an early years professional: developing a new professional identity’, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21:4, 527-540, DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2013.845441

Myers. (2013). ‘Creating reflective practitioners with preservice lesson study’. *International Journal of Pedagogies & Learning*, 8(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.5172/ijpl.2013.8.1.1

National Design Academy (no date). *What is professional practice?* Available at: What is Professional Practice? - National Design Academy (nda.ac.uk) (Accessed on 18 October 2022).

Pollard, A. 2014, *Readings for reflective teaching in schools.* London: Bloomsbury.

Smidt, S. (2015) *Observing young children*. The role of observation and assessment in early childhood settings. 2nd ed. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315741987.

The Early years learning framework for Australia (no date). *Belonging, being and becoming*. Available at: BELONGING, BEING & BECOMING (acecqa.gov.au) (accessed on 19 October 2022).

The University of Edinburgh (2020). *Reflection Toolkit, Gibbs Reflective Cycle.* Available at: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle | The University of Edinburgh (Accessed on: 13 October 2022)

The University of Edinburgh (2020). *Reflection Toolkit, Gibbs Reflective Cycle* [Image]. Available at: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle | The University of Edinburgh (Accessed on: 13 October 2022)

UNICEF for every child (no date). *About us, UNICEF works for children around the world.* Available at: About Us - Unicef UK (Accessed on 23 October 2022).

UNICEF for every child (no date). *How we protect children’s rights with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Available at: UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - UNICEF UK (Accessed on 23 October 2022).

University of Hull, (2022). *Reflective writing: Kolb.* [image]. Available at: Kolb - Reflective writing - LibGuides at University of Hull (Accessed on 14 October 2022).

University of Hull, (2022). *Reflective writing: Kolb*. Available at: Kolb - Reflective writing - LibGuides at University of Hull (Accessed on 14 October 2022).

Welsh Government, (2022). *Curriculum for Wales. Developing a vision for curriculum design.* Available at: Developing a vision for curriculum design - Hwb (gov.wales) (Accessed on 19 October 2022).

Wilson, T. (2016). *Working with parents, carers and families in the ealy years: the essential guide*. New York: Routledge