

What is reflective practice?

Hickson, (2011) defines reflection as a ‘mirror image’ (in a mirror or a puddle of water) to reflect and ponder what happened and why. Reflection is a valuable tool that will help a practitioner to develop, improve and refine their professional practice. Reflective practice involves analysing experiences, reactions, behaviours and decisions and considering what could have been done differently. There are two main ways in which to reflect: one is by looking back and evaluating what has happened and considering how to refine methods and enhance impact in the future, the other is reflecting in the moment, managing a situation as it unfolds, requiring a practitioner to draw on past experiences to help shape decisions and respond thoughtfully and promptly.

Reflection requires critical thinking in order to become more self-aware and clearly identify strengths and ways forward. True reflection is only meaningful when action is taken, changes are made and therefore performance is improved. It continues to be an important skill that should be embedded into regular practice.

Moore et al (2010) suggests keeping a learning journal, a practical method of engaging in reflection. This allows practitioners to record observations, ideas, and experiences, which can later be reviewed to make connections and explore emotional responses.

Why is reflective practice important in the Early Years?

Reflection is an important skill in the Early Years and in education in general. Not only does it help ongoing development of practice, but it also ensures a practitioner stays current and continues to grow professionally. A practitioner who aims to be an enabling adult, will use reflection to ensure the needs of all children are being met. The curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings suggests using careful observations to reflect and follow a child’s interests, helping to provide high-quality provision and planning in the future. (Welsh Government, 2022, p.8).

Zwozdiak-Myer (2023), states reflection as being central to your development as a teacher is your commitment and capacity to analyse and evaluate what is happening in your own school, classroom/s and lessons and use your professional judgement to both reflect and act upon these analyses and evaluations to improve pupil learning and the quality of your teaching. This enables you to make informed decisions and professional judgements derived from an evidence base about the effectiveness of both. Reflecting how to improve communication (Zwozdiak-Myer, 2023, introduction).

The theory of reflective practice

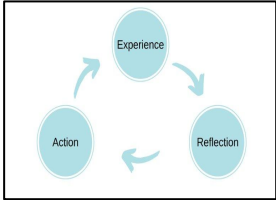
Schon and Dewey are two theorists that not only explain the thinking behind reflective practice but also demonstrate practical ways in which to apply it to your practice.

Schon’s theory of reflection explains there are two ways in which to reflect. Firstly, reflecting in practice, and secondly reflecting on practice. Both of these are equally important but require different approaches and the knowledge to know which one is most appropriate. Reflecting in practice is the process of analysing and responding in the moment, this will require the practitioner to take immediate action. “Competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit.” (Schon, 2016)

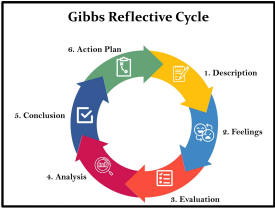
Reflecting on practice involves looking back at what has happened, unpicking it and creating ways forward to improve, and make changes for the future.

Dewey believed that we learn by reflecting on experiences rather than just the experience itself. Dewey’s work on reflective practice theory also explores two narratives. Firstly, routine action; this could be routines or actions that you have followed for a long time and come naturally, these will serve to help practice run smoothly. Secondly, reflective action is based on experiences and will encourage questioning of the “why”, digging deeper and responding by making logical steps to make changes and improve practice. Careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads. (Dewey, 1933, cited in Dicks 2025).

ERA cycle



Gibbs model



Comparison of the two models

My initial thoughts when comparing Gibbs’ model to the ERA cycle was that Gibbs offered a higher level of detail with Gibbs offering six points to consider, in contrast the ERA cycle only offered three. On further research, I found that the three stages within the ERA model focussed primarily on the description of what happened, keeping reflection concise and to the point. Cottrell (2023) supports this three point model by suggesting that all reflection models broadly centre on three main points, thinking back on what has happened, considering why it happened and exploring what could be done differently.

In contrast, Gibbs’ model went into to depth about the emotional impact the experience may have had on the practitioner, encouraging consideration of feelings alongside other elements. Brock (2016) describes Gibbs’ model as moving on from simply describing what has happened, to deep analysis. (Brock, 2014, P16). I think using this model would require a practitioner to consider all aspects of their decision making and consider what new approaches could be used to develop as an individual. This could present itself as a potentially uncomfortable experience.

Although both present a clear structure, reflection can be time consuming therefore I feel many people would choose to use ERA as its simplicity is attractive, it offers a clear, concise method of action that can offer ways forward in a timely manner. In contrast, Gibbs’ higher level of detail would require a practitioner to dig deeper and involve them engaging in more time intensive critical thinking.

A key similarity that I thought was important was the fact that both models present their thinking in cyclical processes, representing the ongoing cycle of reflection practitioners should continue to use to become more self-aware and constantly improve and refine their practice. This highlights the value both models placed on ongoing professional reflection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both models are valuable tools, and their effectiveness depends on the depth of analysis the practitioner intends to pursue.

The ERA model is particularly well-suited for everyday practice, as it is quick, straightforward, and enables timely reflection and response. In contrast, I would choose Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle when aiming for more in-depth critical analysis, particularly to support ongoing professional development. This model is especially useful for examining areas that require improvement as it encourages deeper reflection and long-term growth. Cottrell (2018) also highlights the complexity of multi-stage models like Gibbs’, noting that the inclusion of stages such as ‘feelings’ allows for more emotionally rich reflection.

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