

The Significance of Reflective Practice to Facilitate Professional Development in the Early Years Workforce

What is Reflective Practice?

The University of Cambridge states that reflective practice is a process where consideration for what has happened is taken in to account to enable learning from it going forward. Brock (2015) adds that the more complicated the matter, the more profound the analysis needs to be. Brock (2015) also claims that reflective practice can be emotional and intuitive. Campbell-Barr (2011) defines reflective practice as an activity that brings underlying issues to the forefront from looking at accounts of observation in practice and that this reflection can be done not only as individuals, but in pairs and in groups or teams as part of multiagency working. Campbell-Barr (2011) also claims that reflective practice can go even further than this, in that it can influence society and policy. Moon (2006) describes reflection as being a behavioural characteristic.

What is the purpose of reflection?

Hallett (2011) states that the purpose of reflection is to allow for modification, development and improvement of child services. Brock (2015) agrees, claiming that gaining experiences, whether they are personal, professional or practical and then critically reflecting on them can play a part in increasing knowledge and skills within the workforce. Campbell-Barr (2011) claims that reflecting in practice, gives an insight into what motivated the action and what emotions were felt during that action, resulting in deeper exploration of potential influences, which may not have been immediately apparent otherwise. Brookfield (1995) and Campbell-Barr (2011) both claim that reflective practice is a useful tool to decipher what went well in practice and what did not. In the Early Years Workforce this is necessary in the formation of new curricula, which ultimately aims to provide the best opportunities for children to develop. Campbell-Barr (2011) also opines how it is important not only to focus on the negatives but to take recognition of the positives. This can be important in morale in the early years workforce and improve self-esteem in children within the early years setting. Campbell-Barr (2011) also maintains that reflective practice within multiagency groups can result in better communication and shared understanding of issues, which can be useful in coming up with joint action plans, which in turn can be beneficial to improving provisions for children and their families. Through this peer reflection, communication, understanding the needs of others, empathy and team working skills can also be developed. Whalley (2011) claims that being accountable, autonomous, and sensitive to the effects of change, are components of being a reflective thinker and that when accompanied by the ability to validate practice, gives rise to sound judgements being made. Having self-awareness as a reflective early year's practitioner is of importance as it allows awareness of any stereotypes, prejudices and expectations that may be held internally. Being able to reflect on these personal beliefs is an important step in the development of professional practice with regards to treating children and families fairly in a non-discriminatory manner (Whalley 2011). Moyles (2006) pg14 states that the ability to be self-aware is "achieved and sustained by a process of reflection".

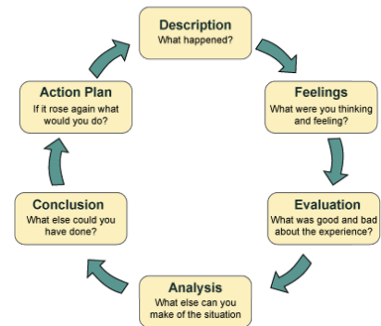
How can reflective practice improve quality in the Early Years.

When quality in the early years is thought of, factors such as how safe the environment and equipment is, how well the practitioners manage behaviour, whether the staff are suitably qualified and whether there is enough staff, are factors that may be considered. Questions around curricula and legislation may be asked. Is the setting following curricula and do they have guidance and legislation in place. Quality can also be measured by how well the staff interact with the children, parents and their colleagues, and whether the children feel safe and secure in the environment (Jackson 2010). Are the rights of the child being met. To be able to improve on quality of services offered within by early years workforce, practitioners must be able to perform reflective practice. They must be able to recognise how their present practice contributes to the quality of provisions being offered, and then reflect on whether the needs of the child or service are being met before evaluating whether more can be done and deciding how to implement positive change to improve quality. Hallett (2013) suggests that engaging in reflective practice, individually or collectively, can enable early years practitioners to learn about themselves, the young people they work with, the settings they work in and the services they provide. This can enable change in the way that the practitioner performs themselves, as they may recognise areas which they need to work on, such as improving communication, which is fundamental in providing the best quality. Communication is one of the core values in professional practice, contributing towards building inter-agency relationships, relationships with children and their care givers, initiating trust, respect, appreciation, and approachability, which all contribute to the quality-of-care young people receive. By reflecting on the young people in their settings, practitioners can understand the development of the children, whether it be emotionally, physically or educationally. Acting on evaluations made can ensure that appropriate measures are implemented, to ensure the child is getting the best out of their education and fulfilling their potential. This is imperative in ensuring the rights of the child are being respected and met. By reflecting on the setting, the practitioner can determine whether health and safety standards are being met, whether there are any adjustments that need to be made to improve quality of the care being given. By reflecting on services, the practitioner can evaluate whether the guidance and legislation they are working from meets the needs of the children and their families within their care. This is important as learning from previous mistakes can prevent future mishaps occurring, thus improving the quality of early years provisions. Such reflections on legislation have led to the establishment of the Children's Act 1989 and the Children's Act 2004 as well as many other pieces of legislation used in the early year's workforce. Hallett (2013) maintains that by engaging in reflective learning, the improvement of provisions and the development of personal and professional practice are accelerated.

How Can we Reflect?

Schon (2007), has a theory that claims that reflection can happen both in practice and on practice. Reflecting in practice, the early years practitioner is essentially thinking about the here and now and acting immediately in response. Reflecting on practice, the early years practitioner is thinking back to a situation to perhaps determine what might need doing differently in future. Schon (2007) suggests that this type of reflection, on practice, requires a deeper level of thought, involving the exploration of theories and an alternative way of working. Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) note that there are many ways for practitioners to reflect, from writing things down either following a model or freely, to the use of images, meditation or movement. It is suggested that reflective practitioners find a way of reflecting that most suits them, with a recommendation that beginner reflectors start by using a model that makes most sense to them so they can learn how to reflect and develop their own style of reflection. Models allow for systematic processing of the complex details of the situation. There are many tools available to aid reflection, such as, reflective accounts forms, swot analysis (strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), as well as cycles such as Gibb's reflective cycle, Driscoll's model of reflections and Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Gibbs Reflective Cycle



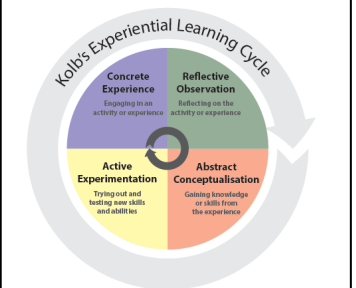
Source: Crowe Associate

Gibb's reflective Cycle

Gibbs (1988) claims that having an experience just to learn from it does not suffice without reflection upon it. The potential to learn from the experience may be lost or quickly forgotten if a conscious decision to reflect upon it is not practised. Gibbs (1988) believes that because of the thoughts and feelings that come from this reflection, we can come up with new ideas about how we can implement future processes or laws effectively. The Gibb's reflective cycle is one of the more complicated models of reflection, containing six stages. These being listed as, description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. The cycle begins with a description of the event that is being reflected on. It follows on to the recognition of our feelings around the event, asking how we felt before, during and after the event. The cycle then asks for evaluation of the event, considering what went positively during the event and what did we feel went negatively about it. From this evaluation, analysis of the event can be done. This is where we can start to understand the event and why we experienced the feelings we did around it. From this understanding, a conclusion about what further measures may, or may not be needed can be implemented to come to a different result. The final step in the cycle is to put an action plan in place, which can be utilised the next time such an even might occur. The University of Edinburgh (2020), describe Gibb's reflective cycle as being a beneficial model to use both in one-off situations and in experiences that regularly occur. However, The Open University critique Gibb's reflective cycle, questioning the depth of analysis and lack of critical thinking around the event, claiming that a lack of acknowledgment is taken for objectivity and assumptions held around the event. The Open University (2020) subsequently believe that only a superficial reflection can result from the model.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb's Experiential cycle is another well-known reflective process. It has four stages that follow after each other in a cyclical manner. The first stage is 'concrete experience' and requires the reflector to take note of the event or experience that happened, whether it is a new experience or a repeat of something that has happened before. The second stage is 'reflective observation'. This is where the reflector really needs to think about the experience, reflecting on feelings, knowledge, skills, and recognising if anything happened that has not been noticed before. The next stage is 'abstract conceptualisation', here is where theories and conclusions can be formed from ideas and logic, rather than from feelings, in an attempt to solve the problems. The final stage, 'active experimentation' is where new ideas can be tried out, and active learning can occur. (University of Cambridge). Although Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is a popular choice among reflector's, there are many individuals who do not agree with it and have been critical. Heron (1992) claims that Kolb's cycle lacks depth, it is underdeveloped and that it is restrictive in regard to its intellectual approach. Morris (2020) claims that one of the main problems regarding Kolb's model is that there is some ambiguity around what a 'concrete experience' truly means, and that there is no specification as to whether the 'Reflection Observation' requires critical or non-critical thinking. Morris (2020) deduced from his study on experiential learning that there is a need for critical reflection within the process.



Source: Skills you need (2016)

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