

1. Reflective Personal Development Plan

A personal development plan (PDP) consists of helping a professional specify his/her strengths in order to determine what he/she is currently capable of, find the weaknesses that need to be improved to become a better professional and set up attainable goals. It is important that the plan is honest and is based on personal experience, suggestions, training and professional matters. Development is crucial in early years education, because no matter what job a professional performs, he/she is still responsible for children's learning, safety and creating conditions suitable for each child. Self-assessing process may include the assessment of communication with children and their families, observation and planning, inclusive practice, ability to safeguard children, keeping confidentiality, being a good team member and the ability to react to feedback in a proper way (Li et al., 2025).

Individuals may have personal objectives like enhancing their confidence, good organization and good feedback-seeking abilities. As for professional objectives, these may be related to improving observation, assessment and planning skills, knowledge of safeguarding, work with parents and colleagues. In all cases, they must correspond to the practitioner's profession and be connected with achieving better results for children and objectives for growth must be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound). For instance, the practitioner may strive for improving the communication skills by observing experienced colleagues, practicing active listening and asking for feedback for two months. The progress could be evaluated on the basis of feedback showing if the communication became clearer and more respectful. Another objective could be achieving better observation and planning by practicing factual noting and using observations for planning activities with review of the progress in a month and a half (Tiainen et al., 2024).

A practitioner can also improve inclusive practice by evaluating relevant advice and modifying resources to meet the specific needs of the child. Evidence of success might include programs that identify obstacles to participation and show suitable modifications. Reflective skills can be acquired by keeping a brief journal and using a method such as Gibbs' cycle after critical events. A journal must explain the occurrence, what was learnt, and what will occur next. Progress must be assessed by reviewing reflections, getting feedback from mentors or supervisors, engaging in professional talks, and seeing the improvements in practice. If a goal is unmet, the practitioner

should consider the obstacles as well as ask for assistance and revise their activities and timeframe accordingly. A PDP must be a continuous process rather than a final document. Its aim is to give rise to effective practice from self-awareness (Zohrabi and Xodabande, 2024).

2. The Importance of Reflective Practice in Early Years

Reflective practice is a vital component of successful early years education because it gives practitioners the opportunity to take a closer look at their decisions, learn from experience, and make improvements in the quality of care and education they provide. The purpose of this briefing paper is to clarify what reflection and reflective practice actually entail, and their role in early years education, outline the theoretical foundations of the concept, and provide a critical comparison of different models of reflection. Reflection can be defined as the thinking that takes place after an event or decision. The term reflective practice is used to denote a more systematic and ongoing process involving the analysis of an experience, consideration of facts and alternative perspectives, and use of the insights gained in organizing future practice. The act of writing a report about what happened is thus not sufficient. For example, while saying that the children lost interest in some activity reflects mere observation of an event, critical reflection will cover all relevant factors, including the duration of the activity, materials and equipment used, atmosphere, children's preferences, and the professional's behavior during the activity (Hayes et al., 2022).

Instead of making personal assumptions, reflective practice must be based on facts and data. Among the evidence used by practitioners can be observed events, responses from children, families' opinions, co-workers' views, professional advices, and results obtained from plans that have already been implemented. Therefore, it is important for practitioners to question their assumptions and think about the existence of alternative explanations of behaviors of children and their reactions to certain situations. All this can make improvements in teachers' work, as reflective practice enables one to assess whether classes and activities provide benefit to children. If kids keep getting bored and uninterested during group classes, the practitioner can assess their duration, equipment, difficulty and teaching style they apply (Kim, 2020).

Reflective practice also plays an important role in grasping individual needs. Children progress differently and communicate differently, which is why practitioners must consider children's strengths, interests, needs or any obstacles that prevent participation. Reflection can inspire practitioners to adapt activities and routines to help children with different skills, languages

or assistance needs participate effectively in practice. Reflection is also relevant to equal opportunities and inclusion since practitioners can sometimes make wrong assumptions or use set practices that may harm some children unintentionally. Analyzing such practices may make it possible to identify barriers and create more equitable opportunities in the future. Nevertheless, mere awareness of a problem does not mean achieving an inclusion. Reflection is only valuable if it results in changes in activities, communication style, routines, and other practices, which should also be verified by practitioners (McGarr, 2021).

Through reflection, professional relationships can be enhanced. Reflecting upon how communication occurs in relations with families and colleague serves to better understand what is happening in the field of practice. Reflective recordkeeping can be useful for predicting developmental needs, providing answers about degrees of responsibility, and assessing interventions. However, it should be pointed out that the practice of reflection takes some time and demands honesty from the practitioners together with the support that can be sufficiently provided. On the other hand, it should be noted that the process of reflection can have negative consequences as it may enhance the existing beliefs rather than challenge them. As stated by John Dewey, reflective thinking should involve a careful consideration of both the experience and the issue at hand relying on facts instead of accepting unproven assumptions without any criticism. In other words, in the field of early childhood practice, this type of reflection allows practitioners to see why a particular event is either successful or unsuccessful (Alt and Raichel, 2020).

Donald Schön separates reflection-in-action from reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action takes place as an event is happening and allows someone to make necessary adjustments in real-time. An example is changing a game when kids appear to be agitated or confused. On the contrary, reflection-on-action is performed after the event and gives a practitioner sufficient time to analyze choices, outcomes, and ways for improvement. Both definitions make sense because the early years profession demands instant judgement but also long-term learning. In his experiential learning theory, David Kolb outlines a cycle, which includes four phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. A practitioner may implement storytelling in their practice, reflect on children's engagement during the story, construct ideas, and test something new in their practice. The model shows that experience alone does not mean that something has been learned; practitioners should be able to interpret an outcome and try innovating an approach (Howell, 2021).

2.1 Critical comparison of reflective models

2.1.1 Gibbs Reflective and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

In 1988, Gibbs proposed his Reflective Cycle that consists of description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and a plan of action. Because of its systematic structure, his model encourages reflective practitioners to think about feelings as well as practical results in their work so that they can learn from what they did and improve it in the future. In terms of practical implementation, Gibbs' model can be used to analyze a situation that was difficult for the practitioner and did not result in expected outcomes. However, this model can lead to its overuse, which does not result in critical thinking necessarily. In any way, Gibbs' reflective model is more appropriate for practitioners who want to relate practice to theory and experiments. This model allows people to experiment with new methods if the situation permits it because in professional life, learning takes place in a less systematic way due to problems with time or resources needed to experiment with their ideas (Tan et al., 2024).

2.1.2 Schön's Reflective Practice and Rolfe Framework

Schön's model helps in understanding professional judgment in complex and rapidly changing circumstances. Reflection-in-action helps a practitioner to identify children's needs in real time, while reflection-on-action allows for more careful consideration of the issue. However, in a busy and tense situation, it can be challenging to reflect, and our quick decisions can be based on incomplete data and unconscious assumptions. The Rolfe et al. model is based on three questions: 'What?', 'So what?', and 'Now what?'. It is brief and applicable to different reflective situations in a busy environment. The simplicity of the model is good when there is little time for reflecting but can make one oversimplify the problem without considering the evidence, context, different possibilities, and consequences (Woodward et al., 2023).

There are various ways of comparing models, such as with respect to their format, timing, feasibility and relation between theory and practice. Gibbs presents a follows a long sequence of stages; Kolb stresses the importance of learning by doing; Schön speaks about reflection in and after action; Rolfe proposes a simple list of questions. All the models may be applied to analyzing an incident where some children are taking part in an activity, while others are not interested in it. There is no one model that works in every situation. It depends on the difficulty of the situation, the available time and the desired outcome of the reflection process. To sum up, reflection

enhances learning when experience is related to practice, theory and modifications made. It can be of help in effectiveness of teaching, making the practice more inclusive and accountable. Still, reflective practice is effective if the practitioner right, looks for alternative explanations and takes action at the end.

3. Professional Practice in Meeting Children's Individual and Inclusive Needs

Efficient practice in early childhood education goes beyond the activities themselves. It requires possessing basic professional values, ethical judgments, clear communication, teamwork with other professionals, careful judgments, conscious planning, and respect for children's rights. These elements are interrelated and contribute to children's education, development, security, and health. Among professional values are dignity, equality, inclusion, protection, confidentiality, and responsibility. Respect means that every child must be seen as an individual who has his/her own thoughts, identity and family background. Equality and inclusion mean that educators must find barriers to children's participation in activities. Protection involves the identification of problems, establishing the required protocols, and maintaining certain ways of communication. Confidentiality is very important because practitioners deal with sensitive information concerning children and their families. The information should be protected and transmitted only through the appropriate channels. However, confidentiality should not prevent taking actions in case when the child is in danger (Soukakou et al., 2024).

For instance, upon observing a noticeable alteration in the conduct of a minor, a professional must make objective notes, avoid conclusions without proof, and comply with the set's protocol. The given procedure values the minor's dignity and makes sure that all matters reported to the needed extent. When interacting with kids, it is important to consider their respective developmental stages and their age of both linguistic and other needs. It is permissible to speak plainly, apply active listening movements, gestures, facial expressions, play, and visual materials for better understanding of a kid by a practitioner. Children speaking different languages or facing problems interacting with others are supposed to get this in addition. It is necessary to listen to children not only for understanding their needs but due to the fact that they shall get their opinions respected. Communication with parents and guardians to be done in a respectful, compassionate

and unbiased manner being sensitive and aware of the information families share with regards to children, their interests, daily routines, strengths, experience of their support needs.

Proper communication between team members is similarly significant. Efforts carried out to make sure good transfers of information, to hold accountable conversations, and to keep proper records help to maintain the care continuity and lessen chances of missing important pieces of information. Communication, in fact, is not merely passing the information, but rather it is a process of listening, verifying, ensuring the confidentiality of the given information and determining its relevancy to the child's interests. Single-agency cooperation is done and aimed at many different goals depending upon the situation of the child involved. It is usually done by the professionals and institutions participating and providing aid based on their competence. In such way, collaborating is an effective way to gather different types of expertise and obtain qualified assistance as well as quick regulatory actions. For instance, if a child has some communication problems, the professional can ensure that they keep the proper records, constructively communicating with the family and following the established protocol. Since some specialists may carry out the assessment and provide practical strategies, the professional is able to think of a few activities and check their effectiveness (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020).

Different agencies can work collaboratively but will experience problems that include delays in communication, lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities within the network, information sharing issues, wayward communications, and insufficient resources. However, timely communication and the existence of relevant information sharing procedures can improve co-operation among organizations that work collaboratively on safeguarding children. Eight sequential stages of observing, assessing, and planning have to be carried out. Observing means recording what children do, how they speak, what they explore, and what they demonstrate. Practitioners must note the difference between reporting facts and interpreting them by assigning children certain motives and abilities without enough proof. One observation cannot be viewed as a full picture of a child's development. As for assessment, it refers to analyzing what has been observed in a child to gain insight into child's learning and development and their needs in support. Planning is the last stage of these stages, which means employing knowledge gained during assessment to choose experiences and resources for children. Good planning corresponds to children's needs and interests and ignores, to a large extent, predetermined activities.

Professionals ought to assess the outcomes of the activities they planned for children. If a child does not participate in an activity, the educator may need to adjust the materials used, the complexity of the activity, the time allocated to it, or their approach to teaching. Too much paperwork prevents educators from spending enough time with children, while little documentation impedes the process of decision-making and continuity of care. Assessment should facilitate the learning and well-being of the children, rather than become an end in itself. The Early Years Foundation Stage framework specifies the requirements for learning, development, and care of children in England from birth to the age of five. Students should follow the current version of the framework, as well as the national standards of their respective countries (Kairienė and Ališauskienė, 2023).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) presents an important framework for children's rights on international level as well as ethical background for decision-making processes regarding children. Article 2 addresses non-discrimination; Article 3 points out that best interests of children should be in the focus of decision-makers; Article 6 touches upon life, survival and development; Article 12, on children's opinions; Article 19, on prevention from violence; Article 23, on rights of children with disabilities; Article 28, on education, article 31 emphasizes the right of children to leisure, play and cultural activities. These rights should assist in making decisions; however, they should not be used merely as a list. Article 2 asks if all children can actively participate in issues that concern them. Article 3 asks to consider their best interests in decision-making. Article 12 encourages practitioners to listen to children and give weight to their views depending on children's age and how mature they are. Article 31 on the importance of games, rest and creative activities in children's lives as one of the rights.

Practicing based on rights means trying to find a compromise between children's wishes and obligations regarding their safety and wellbeing. When it comes to a child's decision to engage in an activity that has an element of danger, child practitioners must pay attention to the child's interpretation but also implement reasonable precautions to make sure that the child is protected. It is advisable to look at the child's opinion critically and not ignore it. The child's opinion must be balanced against safety, developmental, and welfare concerns. This allows to implement children's rights in practice and not just treat them as theoretical ideas. To summarize, the concepts of professional values and ethics, communication, the principle of working in partnership, doing observations and planning actions correspond with each other. Good observations help to create

action plans, good communication makes it possible to understand each other, and working in partnership helps to meet all the diverse requirements of children.

The best practice in early years settings involves practitioners promoting emotional health, good behavior, independence, and social development among the children. Children need to feel safe, respected, and accepted before they can fully engage in their learning. Practitioners will create strong relationships by being sensitive to the children's feelings, recognizing their successes and providing comfort when they face difficulties. A good environment guarantees that children will be encouraged to ask questions, build relationships with their peers, and become more independent gradually. Another thing that is crucial in inclusive practice is getting to know and respecting cultural, linguistic, and family differences. Children come into early years settings with different experiences, traditions, languages, and modes of communication. Practitioners should ensure that their materials include books, toys, pictures, songs, etc. that represent different cultures and family histories so that children can feel like part of a community and learn how to accept other people. In case the child is learning English as their additional language, the practitioner can use visuals, gestures, familiar objects, repetition, and communication with families to promote understanding. It is not fair to exclude a child from activities merely because they communicate differently or need more time to react (Voulagka, 2026).

Collaborating with parents and guardians is crucial in assisting with individual needs. Parents possess a wealth of knowledge about their child's interests, skills, habits, and experiences. As such developing a trusting relationship with families will enhance consistency between home and childcare settings. An example will be when a child suffers serious anxiety at times of transition; in such institutions they can work with families to come up with ways to counter the problem such as the introduction of visual schedules, use of familiar objects, or giving advance warning of any impending activity. Besides, a practitioner must understand that a child's behavior could be an indication of unfulfilled needs that he or she might not even be aware of. When a child is labelled disruptive immediately, the reasons behind his/her behavior should be investigated. If appropriate solutions, such as ensuring predictable routines, defining clear expectations for behavior, using positive reinforcement and giving children a chance to express their feelings, do not help, the practitioner should seek advice from colleagues, and collaborate with parents to identify measures to help kids.

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