

What is reflective practice and what are the benefits of it?

To excel in the role as a childcare practitioner staff should be reflective. According to HCPC (2022) to be able to reflect involves analytical thinking, gaining perception of your professional practice. What is learnt by this way of thinking can be implemented to make advancements and to continue effective practice. There are different ways to reflect on practice ranging from analysing achieved outcomes to thinking critically about the parts that were challenging. Schon (1983, cited in Brock 2015) explains that to enable translation from policy to practice, practitioners need to reflect effectively during and after practice. This includes critical and continual reflection, being willing to try fresh ideas and ways of thinking, therefore developing professional knowledge.

Moon (2004, cited in Brock, 2015) maintains that reflection and reflective practice play a role in professional training and every dedicated practitioner should ensure they have these skills. Reflection is constantly encouraged in both the Health and Social Care and Education sectors. Forde *et al.* (2006, cited in Brock, 2015) say that when reflecting, early childhood educators need to consider their personal values along with their education and pedagogical aims. They can then form their actions and responses based on them, ensuring the curriculum being delivered is inclusive. Ryan (2011, cited in Brock, 2015) argues that sometimes practitioners do not reflect effectively due to misinterpreting the definition, reflection needs to be taught in a methodical way resulting in improved professional practice. Bolton (2005, 2010, cited in Brock, 2015) and Moon (1999, 2004, 2005, cited in Brock, 2015) also state that people can misconceive the meaning of reflective practice which can result in practitioners not benefiting or improving their own practice through reflection.

Moon (2009, cited in Wilson, 2016) claims that when reflecting, it is advisable for practitioners to review experiences. She developed a method of writing that is called 'graduated scenarios' which suggests how beneficial reflection is. According to Wilson (2016) a graduated scenario is a re-telling of the same story and each time it is re-told the reflection is more in-depth. This enables wider reflection; future actions can be planned as a result and it gives practitioners the opportunity to look at things from a different viewpoint. When reflecting important questions to ask are; 'Why did it happen?' and 'What can be learnt from it?'. Reflection needs to be honest and objective for it to be effective, it shows that practitioners are open to learn from their mistakes, improves self-awareness and can aid development opportunities. According to Farrelly (2010) most theorists believe that new understandings and appreciations may be discovered, and problems re-examined through reflective practice.

Campbell *et al.* (2004, cited in Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2015) state that an element to being a reflective practitioner is researching their own experience as a professional, also researching their experience as it is taking place. Bolton (2005, cited in Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2015) believes that a reflective practitioner should deliberate political and social structures.

According to Tarrant (2013) it is suggested that reflection should be initiated by the individual and they can then take onus of it. If practitioners do not fear being criticised by authoritative figures, it is probable they will attempt different approaches, change some aspects of practice and experiment with new ideas, ensuring their own learning is developed by displaying an open and honest attitude.

The impact of reflective practice on a professional practitioner

Theories of Reflection

Schon (2007, cited in Hallet, 2012) and Dewey (1993, cited in Hallet, 2012) believe that reflection is based on problem solving. Practitioners need to pinpoint issues in practice, enabling them to reflect and make improvements based on the reflection. Dewey (1993, cited in Hallet, 2012) points out that when partaking in reflective thinking practitioners need to be; open-minded, responsible and wholehearted. Being open-minded proves that they are prepared to view things from a different point of view and develop their practice. Responsibility shows they have a broad knowledge of children, and they consider how the changes made will impact learning outcomes and service delivery. Wholeheartedness ensures practitioners are reflecting effectively and willing to make positive changes. Van Manen (1977, cited in Hallet, 2012) states that there are three levels of reflection: technical rationality, practical action of reflection and critical reflection.

Dewey (1909, cited in Wilson, 2016) based his principles on child-led learning taking into consideration the knowledge of the child, supporting learning by using observations and experiences. According to Dewey (1938, cited in Brock, 2015) reflection needs to be actively developed and should be purposeful. Deeper intellectual understanding is achieved through reflective thinking and arranging the thoughts extracted from reflection. Schon (1976, 1983, cited in Brock, 2015) claims that when reflecting practitioners need to consider 'knowledge-in-action' which is while something is being done and 'knowledge-on-action' which is after it has been done, suggesting the importance of linking theory to practice, also reflecting on practice using reflexivity. He believes that actions should be analysed after occurring, reflective conversations should take place resulting in relevant changes, assumptions should be challenged, and reflection should result in improved performance. Schon (1983, cited in Farrelly, (2010) points out that knowledge underpinning practice is highlighted during reflection. He emphasises the importance of a broad awareness of tacit or hidden knowledge.

According to Jennings *et al.*, (2013) and Schussler *et al.*, (2019, cited in Virmani *et al.* 2020) to be able to engage in reflective practice people need to be mindful since mindfulness develops self-awareness and awareness of others. Virmani *et al.* (2020) believes that social-emotional competence needs to be considered, focussing on reflective practice and mindfulness, ensuring practitioners partake in caregiving that is delicate and receptive. These are skills that can be easily influenced. However, it may be ineffective to participate in mindfulness and reflective practice at the same time as mindfulness focusses on present moment interpretations and feelings. Reflective practice is aimed at evaluating both the past and present and focusses on observations of other practitioners actions and feelings, as well as their own.

How does reflective practice improve quality in the early years?

Childcare practitioners frequently think on their feet which links to 'knowledge in action'. Often activities and situations involving children do not go to plan or need adapting for various reasons ranging from ability of the child to lack of engagement with the task. Practitioners will also partake in 'knowledge on action' which may include feedback to other colleagues, critically analysing what went well and what did not go well, resulting in future action plans to improve quality in the early years. According to Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2015) practitioners can use reflection to build up knowledge of quality and leadership relative to the families that they work with. Reflective practice enables critical analysis, creating proactive professionals. These professionals put positive interventions into place based on the reflection, benefitting children and their families.

Models of Reflection

According to Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2015) there are many ways that reflection may take place following different models including Kolb (1984) which entails; experience, reflect, conceptualise, experiment, experience and Gibbs (1988) which involves; description, feeling, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. They are both cyclical models which are ideal for beginners to use as they are systematic. Each practitioner should choose the one that they prefer enabling them to acquire their own reflective style.

Atherton (2013, cited in Brock, 2015) believes that when following Kolb's model, it enables practitioners to participate in abstract conceptualisation which results in them putting into practice what they have learnt.

Sometimes this can be done straight away and other times it may be over a longer duration. Kolb's theory entails reflecting on experiences, followed by applying theories to aid description of the experience.

Brock (2015) states that Gibbs' (1988) cycle involves six stages, it is more in depth and enables analysis as well as description of the events taken place, resulting in advancing future practice. The University of Edinburgh (2020) states that you can use Gibbs' cycle for a one-off experience or a regular occurrence. It was first promoted for use in repeated situations but is just as effective for one-off situations. Some useful questions to ask for this cycle are:

What event took place?

When and where was it?

Who was there?

What did everyone do?

Why was the practitioner there?

What were they hoping would happen?

What was the conclusion?

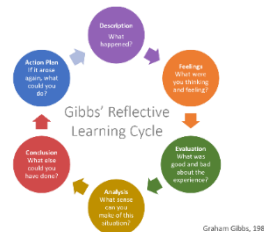
Barbara (2016) points out that Driscoll's reflective model is also known as a 'What?' model. It is simple and easy to use with the aim of using experiences to develop practice. It involves following three steps; 'What?' which is describing the event, 'So What?' which is when reflection and analysis takes place and 'Now What?' is when the experience and what has been learnt is considered, resulting in targets being proposed to enhance professional practice. It is an effective model for practitioners that are new to reflection but not so beneficial for deeper reflection, therefore it is suggested that different models are explored. Feelings can prompt deeper analysis, consequently a question that may be considered whilst reflecting using this model is 'Does the practitioner feel troubled in any way?'.

Practitioners may use different cycles of reflection for varying situations. If they were reflecting on an academic activity, they may use a simpler model like Kolb's or Driscoll's, whereas if they were reflecting on a more complex situation (like a health and safety concern) then they may use the Gibbs reflective learning cycle. This cycle would enable them to reflect more deeply and critically, resulting in calculated conclusions to improve practice and resolve the issue. Depending on the complexity of the matter practitioners may use different cycles, but they all contribute to effective reflective practice.

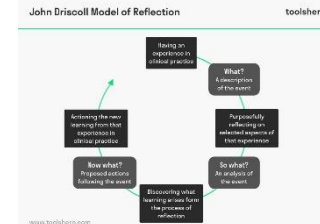
Source: Inspiring Business Performance, 2018



Source: Assignment Studio, 2022



Source: toolshero, 2020



Source: NHS Foundation Trust, 2016

REFLECTIVE ACCOUNTS FORM

Reflection Methods

Reflection can be introduced into early years settings by staff observations, workshops, reflective accounts forms and reflective journals. According to Gasper (2015) reflective journals are an efficient tool to use when thinking reflectively, giving practitioners the opportunity to record things that they have understood, heard and seen, resulting in analysis and evaluation of their thoughts. Keeping a log and writing thoughts down can be beneficial as it gets the brain working in a different way and shows different routes to understanding. Reflective accounts forms follow a straightforward format and break down the reflection into appropriate headings. These may be used in settings to document the reflective process, they can be filled with brief notes describing an experience or observation, what was learnt from it, what could be improved in the future and how it is relevant. SWOT analysis forms can also be used for self-reflection.

Conclusion - How can it support professionals to develop?

Practitioners working in the early years participate in continuous professional development. Durrant et al. (2008, cited in Farrelly, 2010) point out that 'Work Based Learning' (WBL) is becoming more popular for people that want to study enabling practitioners to make constructive progression in practice. Most of the learning is done in work and there is time to reflect on experiences with peers and professionals during lectures. Reflection is included in WBL and ensures practitioners display their reflective abilities taking into consideration their work-approach, skills and knowledge. Farrelly (2010) claims that reflective practice enables staff to improve responses to each child and their individual needs. Brookfield (1995, cited in Reed and Canning (2009) believes that 'critical reflective thinking' trains practitioners to make informed decisions about their practice by inspecting assumptions such as personal, social and political. Canning and Reed (2009) state that practitioners can develop reflective practice by listening to constructive feedback from other staff, including positive and negative. It is suggested that settings should have a good learning community, practitioners need to have willingness to improve their professional practice displaying the ability to listen and respond to other staff members thoughts and experiences. Doing this enables them to analyse the experience and make more sense of it, resulting in new working methods. In conclusion, reflection and reflective practice should continually develop when working as a professional practitioner, it has an impact on practice and enables all staff to consistently make improvements. It also ensures that the children will progress and learn to the best of their ability. Every practitioner will have their individual reflection journey.

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