

The Importance of Reflective Practice as a Professional Practitioner.

What is Reflection and What is Reflective Practice?

Reflection is a thorough consideration of events, incidents or situations. To reflect, a person must be able to look at experiences, taking into account the feelings and reactions of all involved. Reviewing events or situations, focusing and reliving from different viewpoints (Bolton 2010). Furthermore, Bolton (2010) believes that reflection is not a learned technique but more a state of mind. Johns (2009) suggests that the definition of reflection might be described as a mirror to see oneself in context of particular situations in a careful, realistic way. Bolton (2010) describes reflective practice as paying critical attention to values and theories which affect everyday practice. Practitioners get a better developmental insight by examining in this way, learning about themselves and their work from experience. Bolton (2010) goes on to explain that reflective practice offers strategies to open up topics, thoughts and questions that may never have been asked before therefore challenging assumptions. This view is supported by Finlay (2008) who states that reflective practice is a process of learning through experiences offering new understanding and appreciation for practice.

Why is reflective practice important in the early years?

There are many theorists who have devised different cycles for reflective practice. All have the same outcomes but have different ways of describing how to go about their cycles. Some of these are described below.

Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action.

Schon (1987) states that reflective practice can develop a focused and enriched learning environment. An environment that helps staff and children to be engaged, confident, innovative, and responsible. Schön explains further stating that reflective practice is a type of practice through which an individual gains knowledge and learning through their experiences. By using critical thinking practitioners may look at what they do well and how they may improve in their practice. By thinking consciously to deeper levels of awareness about what they do and why they do it. Schon (1987) theorised that the ability to reflect on actions is needed in order to engage in a process of continuous learning. He believed that this is a crucial characteristic for professional practice. Collaborating practice, knowledge and experience with tacit knowing enables practitioners to be guided when working with young children as these are ingrained in the conscious and subconscious knowledge and thinking of reflective practitioners. Values, qualities and skills have been developed from knowledge, training and experience gained in practice with children and experienced colleagues as well as drawing on their own personal life experiences. Tacit knowledge is not something that can be taught, it is a skill that should be recognised and valued. (Schon 1987). Moreover, Schon distinguished reflection-in-action as reflecting on the behaviour that happens as it happens, deciding how to respond and acting immediately from reflection-on-action as reflecting after a particular incident/situation, to analyse, review, and evaluate whether things could have been done differently and/or improved upon. Cheng (2001) agrees adding the importance of documenting and evaluating, paying attention to reflection for action; planning ahead. Reflecting in action; thinking in the moment and reflection on action; reviewing after the event. There are many reflective models, most with a common theme. Each model takes a slightly different approach but they all cover similar steps. The main difference is the number of steps included, different people will be drawn to different models depending on their own preferences.

The ERA Cycle.

Jasper, (2011) developed the ERA cycle. This cycle has three stages. These are Experience, Reflection and Action. The cycle starts with an experience, once something has been experienced it can then begin to be reflected upon. Thinking about what is happening or what has happened allows a deeper thought and examination before making a decision on what action may need to be taken. This action will result in another experience and the cycle will continue. The ERA cycle can be seen as an essential source of support, guidance and inspiration to allow a practice to evaluate and improve their setting. However the cycle can be both a positive and negative experience for a practitioner as although it allows an individual to become self aware and improve it can also make an individual self conscious.

The 'What' Cycle by Driscoll.

Driscoll, (2007) states that his cycle is based on three simple questions. These are What? So what? Now what? These questions allow practitioners to analyse and learn from experiences. The first step would be to ask what the situation is and to get a description of the actual experience. The second step, to reflect on what has been learnt as a result of the experience and an analysis of the experience. Finally what action will be taken as a result of the reflection, questioning whether everything is being done as best it can be. If this cycle was to be carried out in an early years setting, not only would this allow the setting to develop, it will also allow the individuals to develop and give the child the best care to their ability. Children are learning all the time and this needs to be reflected in the activities that are provided to them.

The Experiential Learning Cycle of Kolb (1984)

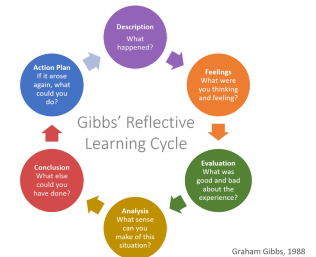
Kolb, (2015) created this cycle in 1984 and developed 4 different stages. These consist of taking an experience, reflecting on that experience and trying to reason and develop new ideas from what has been experienced. To then apply these new ideas to different situations. This demonstrates learning as a direct result of experience and reflection. This cycle is based on developing and understanding the experience. Firstly, concrete experience which needs oneself to actually experience the situation, then reflective observation which requires one to think

about the experience, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Concrete experience is when one experiences the activity, reflective observation is thinking about the activity, abstract conceptualisation is learning from the experience and active experimentation is using the theories to solve the problems and make the decisions.

Gibb's Reflective Cycle.

Andrew and Gibbs (2001) describes this cycle as a more complex model, made up of six stages.

Description which is describing the activity or experience and this is reflected on. Feelings and ideas as to how the experience or activity went. Evaluation of the experience or activity and analysing what went well or what could have gone better. Analysis to try and understand the situation and make sense of it. Conclusion which is reviewing the activity or experience and working out what has been learned from it but also what could have been done differently to enhance the situation. Action plan is how it would or could be done in a different way in the future if the activity or experience was to be carried out again and would include any changes to the original plan.



Gibbs' Reflective Learning Cycle.
(Helen Martin Coaching, 2022)

How Reflective Practice Can Improve Quality in Early Years.

Brock (2015) believes that reflection and reflective practice are core values of professionals and have a key role in professional training. Brock explains that for early years practitioners, reflection needs to relate to their work with young children and their families. For reflection to be purposeful it needs to be meaningful. Ghaye (2000) states that reflective practice may encourage practitioners to try to understand any uncertainty in the workplace and give strength to work competently and ethically. Forde, *et al.* (2006) explain that early years practitioners need to be able to openly discuss their teaching aims as well as their personal values in order to reflect on themselves, their actions and their responses. In doing this the practitioner is able to then provide a genuine inclusive curriculum. The main advantage of reflective practice to early years practitioners is that it enables them to become aware of fundamental beliefs and thoughts and promotes a positive learning environment. This results in a more inviting setting for the children and families.

How can reflective practice develop oneself as a professional?

Moon (2004) believes that reflection is an essential part of professional practice.

There is a general agreement that knowledge as well as skills are necessary to be a good practitioner, though not sufficient. Reflection is considered to be an important part of professionalism. (Dunn et al 2008). Dewey (1908) was a key pioneer in regard to reflective practice. Dewey believed that reflection added dimension to the thought process of people. Dewey believed that people actively needed to develop this process and make it a purposeful action, taking meaning from what has occurred. "We do not learn from experience we learn from reflecting on experience" (Dewey 1933). Dewey argued that by not being a reflective thinker practitioners risk their practice being based on uninformed, outdated thinking. By using skills such as observation and reasoning practitioners can critically reflect ensuring that their work is responsible and ethical. Reflective practice helps oneself in developing confidence, developing the ability to know how to help individuals. It helps in recognising potential problems that may cause difficulty. Promoting responsibility and assisting practitioners to challenge their own choices and justify decisions that are made. It assists in enhancing understanding of different viewpoints and perspectives. Reflective practice promotes self reflection and helps in developing a positive working environment enabling skills to be developed and its effectiveness to be reviewed. Reflective practice is very important for early years professionals to develop as it allows the practitioner to become self aware of their weaknesses and highlights where they need to improve to complete their job to the best they can.

Conclusion.

Reflective practice allows the practitioner to reflect on the actions an individual has taken so that one can learn from the experience, enhance and do it differently next time. Reflective practice is so important in the early years workplace as things change all the time. Each experience that is given to the children needs to be evaluated straight after the experience when it is fresh in the mind of the practitioner. Amendments and consideration as to how it could be done differently the next time are thought about and then the next time the experience is done with these changes in place. Then the process begins again. The experience is evaluated and then the next time it is carried out it is done with the amendments again as discussed above. Reflection does not stop, it is ongoing and needs to be this way in order for experiences for the children to get better and better. Reflection should never stop because after each experience it should be evaluated, made better and then planned for for the next time and after the next time it starts again and then the process starts all over again.

To conclude, reflective practice is vital when working in the early years. It allows better change and developments for the practitioner, the setting and the children.

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