

What is reflective practice?

BY KATARZYNA WIECZOREK-GHISSO

'Reflective practice' in early childhood education has become a widely referred to term since the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

Identified as one of the five principles underpinning the framework, reflective practice is a complex process and one that is a relatively new phenomenon for early childhood educators. According to the framework, reflective practice is a process of inquiry where educators reflect on their setting and think about what they may change. It is about considering how everyday 'happenings' shape thinking



and influence decision-making. Said to enhance teaching and learning, reflective practice is not a one-off process, but is rather a cycle of ongoing learning that occurs when educators take the time to stop and think, even momentarily.

Many models of reflective practice have been explored over the years, most of which support the process as a valuable component of educator practice. According to Schon, who began exploring this concept in the early 1980s, being able to reflect and engage in genuine introspection is fundamental to achieving self-awareness. When undertaken consciously, reflective practitioners are able to think creatively and self-critically about what they are doing, have a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and adjust their behaviour in their everyday interactions.

Despite the benefits, engaging in reflective practice for some educators can be quite daunting, especially given the demands of their everyday duties. The act of reflection, however, needn't be viewed as difficult, nor considered as an added pressure, as everyday events provide many opportunities to engage in self-review. Whether undertaken on the spot or after the event, reflection is useful at any stage. Schon termed such experiences according to three types:

- *reflection-on-action* is a process where we think back on what we have done today, or replay events of the day in our mind
- *reflection-in-action* refers to thinking in the moment while we are working on things, or watching ourselves act and make decisions
- *reflection-for-action* involves predicting what will happen as we make changes to our practice based on our experiences.

The three processes above articulate that reflection can happen at any point of the day. The key is to make a conscious decision to document our thoughts and/or decisions in a transparent way. Transparency is important given that reflective practice is now being measured as part of the Quality Assurance process. Identified under Quality Area 1: Educational Programs, 'Critical reflection and evaluation of children's learning and development, both as individuals and in groups, is used as a primary source of information for planning, and to improve the effectiveness of the program and teaching strategies' (Element 1.2.4). Therefore, as professionals, we must get into the habit of examining what happens in our daily practice and reflect on what we might change.

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Being open to these processes involves:

- understanding that there are rarely straightforward answers to challenges, difficult situations and dilemmas
- questioning practices and assumptions that are often taken for granted
- identifying the values and being willing to rethink these
- using a logical approach to problem-solving as well as imagination, intuition and inspiration
- justifying reasons for actions on moral and ethical grounds
- searching for new ways of knowing and doing, based on research and theory.

Essentially, reflective practice is about self-evaluation, using strategies or tools to understand ourselves, and 'managing' our responses to daily events. Effective educators know themselves; they know their strengths, weaknesses, what they stand for (their values), when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no', and what they want to achieve. Part and parcel of being a reflective educator is acknowledging that you bring your own unique past experiences, current understandings, expectations, learning styles, and personality to your centre's community, which

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may differ from those of other educators. When you think in a reflective way, you are trying to develop your understanding on a deeper level. You identify the aspects of your professional practice that have worked well. You also think about what didn’t work and what could be done differently in the future.

Educators can commence the process of self-reflection by asking themselves a series of questions, such as:

- What did I do today?
- Why did I do what I did?
- Did it achieve the results I expected?
- How might I do things differently?

Learning is strengthened when educators draw on their past experience to guide their decision-making. This prior knowledge has been referred to in literature as ‘funds of knowledge’, based on the simple premise that people are competent and have knowledge, and that their life experiences have contributed to the gaining of that knowledge. The biggest challenge for educators is being able to draw on this knowledge and find ways to build reflective practice into their daily routine. Creating a habit or structure is a good way to start, and that needn’t be in isolation. As recommended by the EYLF, ‘The process of joint inquiry facilitates the review of practices resulting in the exchange of ideas and shared decision-making. It also means educators are more likely to learn, develop and strengthen their capacity as a team’. When everyone in the team contributes to reflective discussion, it is more likely to result in an exchange of ideas, shared decision-making and positive partnerships.

The best way to start is being more strategic about our use of time. Rather than adding another layer on top of the regular tasks that we engage in on a daily basis, educator reflections could be incorporated into daily documentation, such as those that appear in ‘Day Books’ and ‘Portfolios’. Rather than merely

describing what went on in the day, the reflective practitioner may draw from a particular experience, such as the following:

‘This morning, for our group time discussion, I had prepared to share an information book about bugs, as I had observed children talking about lady beetles in our garden yesterday; however, after a short while, I realised that the children were more interested in debating about whether all beetles fly, something that Jacob initiated. I realised that they really wanted to explore this further, so I decided that rather than continuing the book, we would google their questions on our iPad. I was amazed at how knowledgeable the children were about how to find information on the internet...’

The above illustrates a practitioner reflecting-in-action, and being responsive to children’s ideas and interests. By merely stating, ‘I thought, I started, I...’, the narrative becomes a reflective account. Another opportune time to engage in reflective discussions is at staff meetings. Rather than focusing on ‘housekeeping matters’, staff meetings should be used as professional learning forums where educators are encouraged to share their thoughts and daily experiences. Reflective practice needn’t be something else to do on top of our daily commitments but, rather, embedded as part of our everyday tasks.

To conclude, reflective practice is a fundamental component of any educator’s role, especially in developing curriculum that is conducive to children’s learning. Such a grand task is made more worthwhile when based on the expertise of a collective whose ideas have been embedded in everyday events with children, families and colleagues. Reflective practice is not only a worthwhile process in the workplace, but provides support at various levels, all of which positively contribute to enriching social and professional relationships. ③

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