

Critical Reflection

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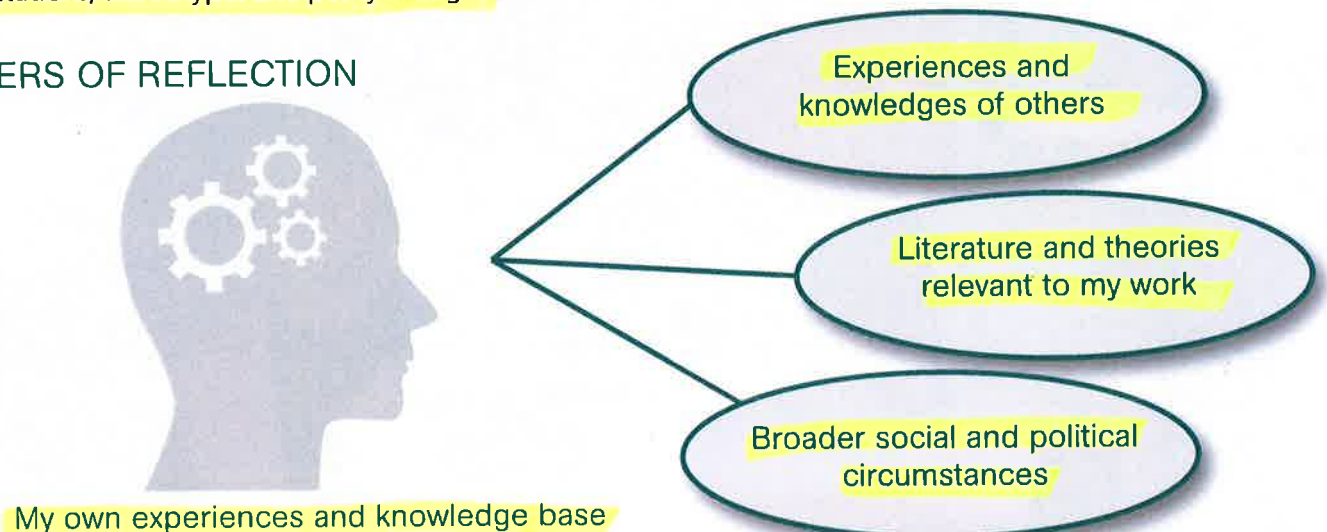


Critical reflection is a necessary component of professionalism in early childhood education. Evidence of critical reflection within a service draws attention to the intellectual work of early childhood educators and highlights professional capacities beyond the care of young children. Early childhood curriculum documents place strong emphasis on the importance of critically reflective practice. For example, the *Early Years Learning Framework* lists “ongoing learning and reflective practice” as one of five key principles of effective practice. Questions to help guide critical reflection are included in the document. Some examples are: *Who is disadvantaged when I work in this way? Who is advantaged? What are my understandings of each child? Are there other theories or knowledge that could help me to understand better what I have observed or experienced?* (DEEWR,2009:13).

It is important for early childhood educators to understand the ways critical reflection is defined and what it looks like in practice. There is a common misconception that critical reflection is about finding fault or criticising an event or the actions of those involved. A useful definition for critical reflection relates more to a professional disposition (attitude) that allows educators to look at an event from a range of perspectives and to ask questions about that event to develop new ways of thinking and understanding. As Smith (1992:103) explains, critical reflection is "an attitude, a frame of mind".

It is also a learned skill. Many educators require direct instruction on processes involved in critical reflection, along with practice and perseverance to continue to develop their skill level. As critical reflection requires educators to look and think beyond what they already know (Schon, 1995), they may need support to think about and apply additional layers needed for rich questions and inquiry. Additional layers can take the form of different perspectives to that of the educator's, literature and theories relevant to the educator's daily work; and considerations of broader social and political influences such as societal expectations, stereotypes and policy changes.

LAYERS OF REFLECTION



These additional layers contribute to a more comprehensive look at an event and can lead to a deeper understanding about what occurred and why. If educators focus solely on their own interpretations of practice, then evaluations of events and interactions may be surface-level. A singular focus may also result in reliance on one's existing knowledge, rather than a commitment to access a range of perspectives and resources to inform the reflective process.

Consider the following scenario related to a child's capacities with self-help skills. Beyond a personal reaction or response, consider different ways of thinking about this event by adding layers of reflection. Some examples are provided.

SCENARIO:

A male child aged 3.10 arrives at Kindy wearing a nappy. In response to the centre's expectations, his father takes him to the toilet to change into underpants. Throughout the day, the child is taken to the toilet by educators and placed on the seat in the presence of other children. He displays discomfort with this process and typically soils his clothes 2-3 times a day. When the father collects the child in the afternoon, he is again placed in a nappy. Due to family preferences and cultural reasons, the child is not expected to be autonomous in self-care routines at home.

Layers of reflection - Guiding questions:

My own experiences and knowledge. What do I value in terms of independence and interdependence? How do my values influence my responses to this event? In what ways are my choices influenced by the expectations of the service and fellow educators?

Experiences and knowledges of others. In what ways have I considered the perspectives of the parents and the child? How is this evident in my response to this event and my interactions? How are fellow staff in the Kindy room impacted by this event?

Literature and theories. Developmental theories indicate to me that by the age of three, children are typically autonomous with self-care routines. Does this Western view of child development apply to all children? What other literature or theories will provide me with different viewpoints about child development? What does literature on inclusivity say about responding to family preferences in the child care program?

Broader social/political circumstances. In Australia, most Kindy rooms do not have nappy-changing facilities. What does this tell me about what is valued in early childhood education in Australia? What does this imply about children's capacities at certain ages? Does this place an emphasis on 'readiness' (e.g. for school) rather than what is suitable for a child at any given time?



Processes of Critical Reflection

When considering how to move from reacting to an event, to thinking more critically about what took place, it is useful to think about different levels of reflection. Adapted from Bain (1999), the following three levels of reflection show how an educator can move from 'reaction' to 'critical reflection'.

Level 1: Reacting

- Commenting on one's feelings related to an event
- Providing a straight description with no added observations or insights
- Making an observation or judgment without detailing reasons for the judgment
- Developing a shallow understanding of what occurred and why.

Level 2: Elaborating

- Comparing one's reaction to other people's responses and perspectives
- Analysing an event by asking questions and considering alternatives
- Seeking a deeper understanding of an event by relating it to current literature and theories.

Level 3: Reconstructing

- Drawing revised and new conclusions about your practices and the practices of others
- Ongoing exploration of relationships between practice, literature and theory
- Planning further learning on the basis of your reflections.

As seen in Level 3, effective critical reflection should lead to findings about what occurred and why, as well as the development of plans for change. Ongoing questioning of changes to practice and one's thinking is essential to the reflective process.

When Do Educators Reflect?

Educators reflect in-action (rapidly and thoughtfully during an action) and on-action (briefly and systematically after an action) (Schon, 1995). What is reflected on in the course of a day and over time should be meaningful to educators, children and families. It is not practical to reflect critically on everything that occurs within classroom practice and service delivery. Critical reflection can be focussed on a long-term issue, or more spontaneous events and interactions that have meaning for key stakeholders. Reflections can occur verbally between educators and also in thought. Educators may include written reflections as part of their documentation or in a communal journal. Where appropriate, reflections should be shared with children and families to draw attention to the intellectual and evolving nature of educators' work.

Building a Reflective Culture

A reflective culture will support all educators, regardless of their qualification and experience, to engage in critically reflective practices. Key elements required to build a reflective culture include:

- **Direct teaching:** some educators require explicit support when learning about and applying processes of critical reflection.
- **Modelling:** educators with experience in critically reflective practice are well positioned to model processes of reflection to colleagues. Examples from everyday practice can provide a basis for discussion, modelling and teaching.
- **Collaboration:** a collaborative approach to critical reflection is valuable because multiple voices and perspectives are included in discussions. Collaboration can occur between educators, other professionals, children and families.
- **Physical spaces and resources:** consider if there is a space within the service that invites critical reflection. Educators require access to current literature (professional magazines, journal articles, texts) to extend their knowledge base. Prompts such as a highlighted section of an article or a question written on a noticeboard can be used to support critically reflective practice.
- **Time:** effective critical reflection takes time and practice. Opportunities for individual and collaborative reflection are necessary to build educators' skill levels.
- **Expectation:** curriculum documents highlight expectations around critically reflective practice, but this should also be a priority for educators in leadership positions. When time, physical spaces and resources are provided, then expectation can be built into the culture of reflective practice at the service.

Developing critical reflection takes time and courage. A key component of courage is the willingness and ability to 'step outside' one's own interpretations and experiences to explore new ways of thinking about events, interactions and issues that occur in daily practice. When this occurs, educators, children and families will benefit greatly from deep reflections about professional practice.

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Reflective Practice: Making a commitment to ongoing learning

Posted on July 10, 2018 by Anne Kennedy



Whether reflective practice takes place 'in the moment' or 'later', with a colleague or alone, in this all-time favourite blog, Dr Anne Kennedy draws attention to the crucial role of ongoing learning, providing examples, strategies and tools for educators. Learn more about deepening your practice in Dr Kennedy's workshop at the 2018 ECA National Conference in Sydney 19-22 September.

Often when discussing the national *Early Years Learning Framework* Principle on reflective practice, we overlook the initial words in the Principle: "**Ongoing learning** and reflective practice" (EYLF, 2009, p. 13). This part of the Principle is a reminder that engaging in reflective practice is about **educators making a commitment to ongoing learning and being a member of a learning community** (NQS, QA 7.).

What do we mean by reflective practice?

Reflective practice can be undertaken individually or with a group or team and can be practised *in the moment* or it can happen *later* by taking the time to think about an event or some aspect of practice. Educators can reflect with colleagues, children, families and other professionals. Reflective practice means:

- thinking deeply about an interest, issue, event, or practice from different perspectives
- being honest about all aspects of practice including elements that are positive and those that are of concern
- monitoring pedagogy and curriculum as part of a cycle of continuous improvement
- listening to and learning from others
- engaging in an ongoing process and not a 'one-off' activity.

Why is it important to be a reflective educator?

The National Quality Standard (NQS, QAs 1 & 4) and the EYLF recognise that reflective educators are more likely to:

- develop greater self awareness about the values and beliefs informing their practice and decision making
- understand the ethical nature of their work
- examine the theories underpinning practice
- engage in a continuous cycle of inquiry and improvement
- challenge taken for granted practices
- identify and take action about gaps in their professional knowledge.

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Research shows that reflective practice makes a positive difference for children, families and communities by improving the overall quality of educators' work (Marbina et al; 2010).

How can we practice reflection?

One way to support or improve reflective practice is to use an inquiry cycle process:

Alert and aware: Being alert or aware of something that seems worthy of thinking about more deeply either individually or with others, is the first step in reflective practice. Both positive events and things that worry educators can occur every day in an education and care setting, but not everything that happens requires deeper thinking. Support from more experienced educators can help others to recognise when they need to be alert and aware.

Analysis: After becoming aware of something that is interesting or concerning, reflective educators analyse the matter by reflecting on it in order to gain a deeper understanding. Gaining others' perspective, asking 'why' questions and undertaking reading related to the issue supports the analysis process.

Action: Reflective practice requires some type of response or action. Understanding an issue or something of professional interest more clearly helps educators to take appropriate action either collectively or individually and often in collaboration with children and families or other professionals.

Assess: Educators and other stakeholders such as families and children assess the outcomes from the actions taken as a result of the reflection process to ensure the intentional actions are improving practice and outcomes. Informal assessment of the outcomes could include checking with families or children about how they are experiencing the changes and documenting their responses to inform further decision-making.

Example

A reflective educator would be 'on alert' or aware if a toddler in the group who usually separates readily from his mum found it very difficult one morning. While the separation difficulty might be a 'one-off' behaviour, it is something worth noticing, reflecting on and discussing with others including the child's mum.

Reflecting with mum on why the child found the separation difficult that particular morning might reveal that they had a very late night because of a family celebration, or that the child's dad has gone interstate on business. If the child's separation difficulties were due to the father's absence, the educators could use a photo of the child's dad to reassure the toddler that dad is away but will be coming home soon. Providing close physical contact and using comforting, reassuring words each morning would also help to reduce the child's anxiousness about his dad's absence.

Sometimes parents and educators might be unsure about the reason for a child's particular behaviour or response. The action in that instance would be to continue to be alert and to reflect on what is happening in order to understand the issue more clearly.

Reflective practice strategies, tools and resources

There is a range of strategies, tools and resources to support individual and group reflective practice.

Early Childhood Australia professional resources such as the [ECA Learning Hub](#) modules are an excellent resource for supporting reflecting on practice with others or individually.

Keeping a journal or notebook supports documenting the reflective practice process. Journal notes might include what happened, why, who was involved, key points from discussions, actions that were taken and the outcomes.

Setting aside time at every staff meeting for reflecting on one aspect of practice and planning actions develops a culture of inquiry in a service or setting. The discussion and decisions from these team reflections can be incorporated into the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

Reflect with children every day by using questions that respect their ideas and learning: "What did you learn today?" "What do you want to learn more about?" "How do you know that?" "What makes you think that?"

Support educational leaders' capacity to lead or support reflective practice by providing professional learning opportunities focused on reflective practice and through coaching or mentoring by a more experienced leader.

Conclusion

Reflective practice supports ongoing professional learning and development by building on educators' strengths and skills, and providing deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in their roles and responsibilities. Educators who enact a commitment to reflective practice and taking action make a positive difference to the quality of the education experience and to improving outcomes for children and families.

References