

Reflection in Action

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Ngā mihi Aroha
Heartfelt greetings

To the indigenous peoples of the land, to the Nungawal people,
in recognition and acknowledgement of all that has gone before and all that is to come

To all the people here who bring knowledge and commitment to the work we all do
with children, families, whānau and communities

To the organisers with the vision of what we can all gain from the opportunity to
share and understand what we are already doing, and what more we can do.

He aha te mea nui o te ao?
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata

What is the most important thing in the world?
It is people, it is people, it is people.

Reflective practice has become a 'taken for-granted' and expected activity for all teachers in early childhood education. In the academic writing and in research about how to undertake and monitor the processes needed to achieve critical reflective practice there are a number of theories, models and suppositions. This presentation seeks to focus us again on some of the key components of reflection linked to practices in early childhood education. The aim of this is to ground us again as teachers in the importance of reflection-in-action, as a means of constantly improving teaching and learning for the children that we work with and for the colleagues and families who share our work with children. We hope that you will all want to revisit the practice of reflection as a way of being intentional partners in the process of learning and teaching.

What makes reflection an assumed practice? In part, this is because there are aspects of reflection that we use all the time in our daily lives. Let's take some dictionary definitions that help to clarify this.

- Reflection – can mean to think, meditate or ponder.
- Reflective practice – can mean relative, thoughtful or produced by reflection, or characterised by quiet thought or contemplation
- Practice – characterised by action as opposed to theory

These definitions demonstrate one of the challenges for us as we seek to apply reflection to what we do as teachers. If reflection can be defined as thinking rather than doing, and practice can be defined as action rather than thinking, will we automatically link the two together? It is possible for us to learn more effective ways of working with children, better ways of being a teacher, but then not apply it to our daily teaching practice. And we may also try to use theory to understand what we do, why we do it and how we might change it to better reach the children we work with, but then not link this new theory to the specific actions we take each day in our teaching. And some of the actions we take while well intentioned may not be in the best interests of children's learning.

Our focus on reflection in action leads from the challenges within these definitions to a consideration about what reflection would mean for teachers focused on continually improving their practices with children. As teachers, it is possible to avoid the split between thinking and doing that we identified above, by doing the following:

- Thinking about what you know and refining your teaching practice according to those thoughts
- Thinking about what you know or have learned and refining your teaching practices according to those theories

When asked, early childhood teachers identify the very real challenges of reflection-in-action touched on above, they identify reflection as including:

- Inquiry
- Developing your practice
- Changing what you do
- Always focusing on improvement
- Thinking about what you are doing
- Critiquing your own practice
- Hard!
- Something I do because it keeps the boss happy...

Reflection matters. It allows us to both recognise and seek to make sense of the 'messy complexity' of the early childhood education setting. At the same time reflection enables us to recognise that what happens in the early childhood education setting is only ever 'partially apprehendable.'¹ Which means that we will only ever be able to understand a part of the complexity of influences on what is happening at any time. Reflection in action also recognises, acknowledges and brings to the foreground the central roles of people in educational processes.² And reflection legitimises a range of approaches and behaviours, while making central the relational expertise that is a key component of expert practice.

¹ Goodson and Walker, 1991

² Hammersley, 2007

So what are the prompts for understanding what reflective practice looks like? Reflection asks for a process of thoughtful and meditative review of what we do with children. It requires a light-footed combination of activity that is selective, flexible and strategic, drawing on relevant theory, strategies and techniques in the context that you work in. Reflection requires that we take into account the whole complex picture of what is happening in the early childhood education setting, and outside it, from multiple points of view. It gives voice to feelings, but makes central, informed understanding and meaning-making. And all the while reflection is intended to enable us to gain a concrete understanding of ourselves and why we react to people, situations and circumstances as we do.

In contrast, more traditional teaching practice maintains a position of the teacher as the one who knows everything about what to do, and then ‘does’ this to children, filling the empty vessel with the “learnings” that are valued by the teacher and suit the timetable, resources and capabilities of that teacher. This non-reflective way of working means that teachers have little need to connect what happens in the early childhood education setting with the learning that children do everywhere else. This also gives teachers permission not to attend to the cultural knowledge and values of the families and whānau of the children attending the early childhood education setting.. This makes the unquestioned or unacknowledged culture and values of the teacher an over-riding standard for the context of the early childhood setting³. There is a strong basis of evidence identifying the need to link learning at home and learning at the early childhood education setting to best achieve positive outcomes for children, particularly those most underserved by the current education system.⁴

Given that critical reflection has been discussed, described and developed in the literature for over a decade, a real risk is that of over assimilation. We come to know that it is acceptable and desirable to report that we are reflective and so we say we are and tell a good story that sounds reflective, but in practice nothing changes. Effective tools are needed to ensure that we undertake reflective practice in meaningful ways.

The use of diaries and reflective journals as reflective tools has been described by many writers in early childhood education⁵ and the challenge we make is for you to take time to restart your own use of a diary. Your goal is to reflect honestly on your own practice by writing about it. Start with one area of your work with a child. Seek to describe an event or an interaction. Then begin again that process of evaluation by examining each of your:

- thoughts
- feelings
- actions
- reactions

And explore the outcomes of the interaction you have chosen. Take multiple perspectives on that interaction – yours, the child’s/ren’s you were working with, your colleagues, the parents of the child and the wider learning community that you are a part of. You then reflect on your own practice – you are now trying to make sense of

³ Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001

⁴ Ministry of Education, 2003

⁵ Schon, 1991

complex activity. What is the impact for the child and their learning? How will you change your practice when you find yourself in a similar situation again?

Consider the role of theory and research in the analysis of your practice. Theory can provide a backbone and an external frame of reference that aids you in understanding the observations of practice that you make. Theory also provides a basis for challenging and changing the beliefs and attitudes of yourself and of others. Sound understanding of theoretical positions also enables you to strengthen your ability to improve your teaching practices, and this will better support the learning and development of the children that you work with. Theory can also suggest what to change about your practice and what to retain and refine.

When we talk of critical reflection on practice we do not refer only to those actions that are problematic or to finding out what is wrong in what we are doing. Reflection should also encourage us to move from being a good teacher to being a great teacher. Every teacher has strengths and/or areas of practice they are more relaxed with. It is essential to reflect on what is going well, what makes you feel good and what you enjoy. Reflecting on what has gone well helps you identify positive teaching practices that you can transfer to other areas of your teaching, helping to build your confidence and your overall abilities as a teacher. More importantly it helps you to identify your strengths and to develop expertise in aspects of your teaching; you can share this with others and support them to become more effective teachers. You become a role model and a leader who makes a significant contribution to the teaching profession.

Using reflection in practice includes being intentionally present⁶, at the level of the child, and their wider family, applying best practices and encouraging children's use of their own developing problem-solving skills. We are seeking to empower children and ourselves as teachers through a process of systematic evaluation of our practice. Taking time to develop awareness of how we are as teachers, what sort of teachers we are and the type of teacher we want to be. And we are seeking to progress from good teachers to great teachers of the children that we work with.

We began by saying reflection in practice has become an assumed part of teaching practice the message we want to leave you with is that reflection in action needs to be a conscious part of every teachers daily practice. It can support you to be more effective teachers focused on supporting learning for yourselves and for the children you work with.

⁶ Brink, 2005

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