

## A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

---

Judith Leukoe, past general manager, YMCA Children's Services

Adapted from: *Resources in Early Childhood Education: A Publication of Ryerson's Gerrard Resource Centre*, Winter, 1999

Since the early 1930s, a growing body of research on adult learning styles has cited reflection as a key ingredient of effective learning. Reflective practice is more than just thinking about what we do. It is a process of analyzing our work, developing generalizations about our work and modifying our work to improve our practice. The process of reflection offers the opportunity to refine our practice and increase our understanding of our work and its impact on families and children.

Kolb (1974) describes a cyclical four-part model for the reflective process: 1) a concrete experience followed by 2) observation and reflection, followed by 3) formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, followed by 4) testing the implications of the concept in new situations.

Chickering (1976) defines experiential learning as "learning that occurs when changes in judgements, feeling, knowledge, beliefs or skills result for a learner from living through an event with its attendant emotional impact, and the construction of personal meaning from this experience."

Boyd (1981) believes that we learn throughout the life span by experiencing our environment and then creating meaning from that experience from the "inside out" rather than as a detached observer approaching it from the "outside in." He defines reflection as the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experiences (present or past) that are of central importance to the self.

Schon (1983) suggested that the capacity to reflect-on-action and engage in a process of continuous learning is one of the defining characteristics of professional practice. He was critical of "charging students up with material in training schools so they could apply it when they entered the world of actual work." Instead, he believes that in today's fast-changing world, professionals need to be able to "think in action."

### Benefits of Reflective Practice

Evidence in the literature demonstrates improved understanding of actions and reactions in teaching situations, and increased opportunities to behave differently as a result of reflection after an experience (e.g. Scheurman, 1995; Leat et al., 1992; Chickering, 1976.) Those who have personal experiences with

some or all of the components of reflective learning describe the following benefits:

- Better understanding and retention of the experience
- Understanding new things about behaviours: their own and those of the children, parents and their colleagues
- Taking the time to process events
- Thinking about what could be different
- Focusing on ways to improve for the future

### Components of Reflective Practice

The full cycle of reflective practice for maximum learning and understanding involves six steps:

**1. Preliminary discussion and goal setting.** The first step in the cycle involves open discussion about the reflective practice process and reasons for using the approach. For some this will be an exciting and natural process. Others will find it unappealing and will be reluctant to use this methodology. Participants need to feel safe in talking freely about their anxieties and concerns. Generally, a time for comprehensive questions and debate will bring people into a better understanding and spirit of co-operation. Teaching/practice assignments and goals need to be specified and discussed. Goals of learners will result in more buy-in and commitment than those of mentors/instructors. Goals can be simple, for example, learning the names of the children in the program, or more complex, for example, observing how one responds to the pressure of trying to get everything done and tidied by closing time. Goals need to be in keeping with the level of experience of the learner. They should be written down, and both learner and mentor should keep copies.

**2. Observation and action.** Over the course of the day, students make a conscious effort to make observations of different components of the program including the children, the parents, interactions between parents and children, the activities, and their own responses. Depending on the goals, additional components may include colleagues, facilities, equipment, etc. Most often in the beginning stages, only observation is required. However, in some cases, for example a goal of learning if children had any difficulty separating from their parents in the morning, initial observations of interactions between the children and parents might lead to queries that required speaking with parents

as well. A brief time should be set aside every few hours to jot down quick notes keeping observations in mind. Note taking is usually very brief, just sufficient to jog the memory later.

**3. Journal writing/note keeping.** A regular time should be set aside for writing at the end of each day. This can be the most difficult part of the process because of both the time involved and the introspection needed. Positive reinforcement during the process will help. To encourage reflection rather than a log of daily events some guidelines are advised, for example,

- Divide the page vertically with observations on one side and reflections, thoughts, feelings or images on the other side
- Experiment with different styles such as the format of a letter, working with poetry, metaphors or other creative forms
- Include observations on the children, the parents, activities and the self
- Assure privacy

**4. Time for reading and reflecting.** Just as a regular time is set aside for writing, time should be set aside for reading and reflecting on what one has read. Journal articles and books provide further insight and the opportunity to view things from another vantage point, thus offering a different interpretation of a situation.

**5. Active and reflective discussion.** This should take place in regular weekly sessions of no less than thirty minutes either in individual discussion between learner and mentor, or with a small number of colleagues who can learn from each other. The literature supports the additional learning gained by small group work in the process. This may require a one-hour meeting. The facilitator's role is paramount. The modeling demonstrated assists the learner in his or her own work with children and parents. As well, the facilitator's questions can stimulate deliberate and thoughtful responses instead of only open-ended discussion. The facilitator can challenge internalizing information learned and support the learner to understand the implications for their own work. Guided discussion and feedback including both theoretical and professional content are preferred. Facilitators also need to be aware of and reflect upon the experience of learners. This involves a quiet, respectful atmosphere where participants feel comfortable and have trust. Perhaps the biggest challenge is helping learners to think critically about their experiences without being critical of themselves or experiencing others as being critical.

**6. New goal setting.** Before the meeting ends each participant should discuss and agree upon the goals for the following week. Depending on the perceptions of the individuals, these can be new or continuing goals.

### **Difficulties in Implementing Reflective Practice**

In the beginning, there is often confusion about the process of reflection. As well, both writing the journal or keeping notes and discussion with colleagues or mentors are found to be time-consuming. Perseverance really does make a difference and along the way, the benefits outweigh the difficulties. Ultimately, the

investment of time is seen as beneficial as improvements in understanding, planning and executing activities reduce time in the long run when reflective practice becomes established.

### **The Power of the Process of Reflective Practice**

My experience with the process of reflective practice has shown its powerful ability to demonstrate the need for change. For example, I have observed teachers become aware of how little observation they were really doing with respect to children's attitudes and moods, their surprise that something they assumed they were doing was not taking place, and their ability to change within a week. Another example is that of swim instructors' awareness that they were not learning the names of children, and within a week beginning to call children by name at least twice each session. After initial resistance, learners frequently remark on the healthy emotional release of frustration, confusion and anxiety that journals eventually provided for them.

### **The Importance of the Process**

The increasing complexity of work with children and families, and reforms to curriculum, facilities, equipment etc. require today's practitioners to demonstrate professionalism, skill and knowledge not previously necessary. Roles have changed in response to major societal, economic, cultural and political changes that have affected us all. We are being asked to work in new ways, to enter into new kinds of relationships with those around us, and to be capable of making our knowledge and understanding about our practice explicit to families. Reflective practice and learning as a methodology for our own development will help us model behaviours that enable children and families to learn the processes of reflection and active involvement in learning themselves.

### **References**

- Boud D, Keogh R, Walker D (1985). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. New York: Nichols Publishing.
- Boyd EM (1981). Reflection: Key component in experiential learning. Presented at the 1981 Lifelong Learning Research Conference, College Park, Maryland.
- Chickering AW (1976). Developmental change as a major outcome. In: MT Keeton & Associates (eds.), *Experiential learning: Rationale, characteristics and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Kolb D (1974). *Changing human behaviour: Principles of planned intervention* (with R. Schwitzgebel). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Leat D, McCarthy S, Peck E (1992). Consolidating learning from experience. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, **17**(2) Summer, 89-100.
- Marsick VJ, Cederholm L, Turner E, Pearson T (1992). *Action-reflection learning: Training & development*. Alexandria, Virginia: American Society for Training and Development.
- Scheurman G (1995). Constructivism, Person Epistemology and Teacher Education: Toward a Social Developmental Model of Adult Reasoning. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, CA, April 18-22.
- Schon D (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.