

Critical Reflection

Author:
Melinda Miller
Lecturer
Queensland University of Technology

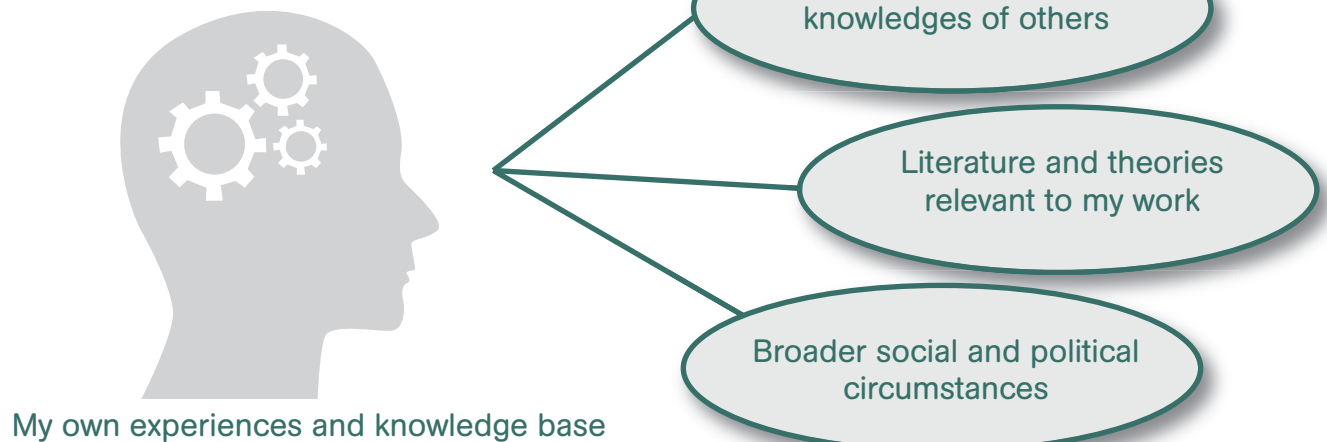


Critical reflection is a necessary component of professionalism in early childhood education. Evidence of critical reflection within a service draws attention to the intellectual work of early childhood educators and highlights professional capacities beyond the care of young children. Early childhood 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.

References

- Bain, J. D. (1999). Using journal writing to enhance student teachers' reflectivity during field experience placements. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 5(1), 51-73.
- DEEWR. (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Schon, D. A. (1995). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. England: Arena.
- Smith, F. (1992). *To think: In language, learning and education*. London: Routledge.
- Image accessed from:
http://static.dreamstime.com/thumbimg_378/1237816750jTipf3.jpg