Developing as a Reflective Early Years Professional

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Developing as a Reflective Early Years Professional

A Thematic Approach

Carol Hayes, Jayne Daly, Mandy Duncan, Ruth Gill & Ann Whitehouse

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Meet the authors

Carol Hayes

I have worked in Early Years for the last 40 years as a teacher and tutor and at Staffordshire University for the last six years as a principal lecturer and academic group leader. There I helped to develop a thriving early childhood studies department with programmes from foundation degrees to masters in Early Childhood. My specialist areas are cognitive development, language literacy and communication. I taught the module Reflective Practice to the early childhood studies level 6 students. My main research interests are dyslexia and communication difficulties and the role of graduate teaching assistants in the workforce.

Jayne Daly

I have worked in Early Years for the past 25 years as a nursery officer (NNEB), an Early Years manager and tutor. Throughout my professional practice I have worked within the public care, health and education sectors. My current role came about after the realisation that I wanted to 'give something back' to those new to providing positive outcomes for young children and their families, and this passion pushed me forward into teaching within the higher education (HE) sector at Staffordshire University. I have been employed as a lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, teaching from levels 4 to 6. My specialist areas are leadership and management, child development and safeguarding children, but I also have an interest in international perspectives in terms of curriculum development.

Mandy Duncan

I began my career as a nursery nurse 15 years ago, before training as a teacher. I initially worked with young children in primary schools in both inner city and rural areas and later with young people aged 14–19 in a further education (FE) college. I have been a lecturer in HE for the last four years, teaching on BA (Hons) and MA Early Childhood Studies and BA (Hons) Childhood and Youth Studies courses. I am currently engaged in doctoral research with young people undergoing child protection proceedings.

Ruth Gill

My experience with children started as a children's nanny to bereaved families and progressed to working in a further education-based nursery as an assistant. I quickly progressed to management, which was a real challenge as my training is Early Years based and I really missed having consistent contact with children. I continued to study at HE level and could justify spending more time with children for my research into the key person approach. Teaching in HE allows me to share my passion for quality interactions between staff and children with a wide audience of new and experienced practitioners.

Ann Whitehouse

I started my career as an NNEB and worked for a number of years in nursery education. More recently, I have worked as an Early Years lecturer in FE and have played an integral role in developing a foundation degree in Early Years for experienced practitioners. I am currently a senior lecturer at Staffordshire University, working with full-time and part-time students on Early Childhood Studies programmes and I am an award leader for the foundation degree. My specific interests are related to the development of Early Years' pedagogy and my research always involves listening to practitioners' experiences and views.

Foreword

I am pleased and honoured to introduce this book to you. It has been written by a team I know well as I was the external examiner and consultant to their Early Years programme at Staffordshire University when it was expanding rapidly, across the Midlands and Northwest, both in the number of colleges, and consequently the large number of students, it encompassed. At the same time it developed a variety of courses from foundation through to postgraduate degrees. This is a dedicated and knowledgeable team, one of the most hard-working I have known in my long career, committed to the highest levels of academic learning and professional practice.

The team's vast knowledge and experience in the field are clearly reflected in this publication. How the authors found time to research and write it in the midst of their hectic schedules, I do not know; yet they have managed to produce a book which more than meets the needs of students and practitioners, from their earliest undergraduate days through to masters degrees and beyond. They analyse a theme – reflection – which is threaded through many professional pathways, particularly in teaching in its fullest sense, but rarely pulled apart. Consequently few of us have ever been secure in what reflection actually means, how to do it and then how to apply the outcomes of our thoughts to the situations in which we find ourselves. This book gives us not only techniques to try but, more importantly, it demystifies the process and in doing so offers confidence and trust in our own abilities to analyse and thus value what we have experienced. It moves away from the negative connotations of reflection and helps us to dwell more on the positive aspects of what we achieve every day, which Carol Hayes rightly considers allows us *to use our experience to make sense of complex professional judgements* (Chapter 1). In Chapter 2 Ruth Gill has selected a practitioner's statement which encapsulates something we should all learn to do in our often hectic lives: *I always reflect on the past 24 hours and recall five things I am grateful for and then I record this in my journal* (p 35). Chapter 3 offers us a thorough interpretation of the role of a critical friend. Like the term 'reflection', 'critical friend' has been introduced into the Early Years arena without much thought given to what it really means and how it is used. Ann Whitehouse has given the term a purpose, using the thoughts and discussions of two of her former students to bring life and meaning to the concept.

Throughout the book, there are strong indications not only of a deep knowledge of the subject matter but also a commitment to revealing its value to the members of the Early Years

cadre. To do this the team has utilised examples from practice, posed questions designed to help readers think through any issues and provided a range of references as guidance in further reading and research as well as to inform day-to-day practice. All this is cemented, however, in a solid framework of scholarship, drawing on up-to-date research and writing as well as classical theory and studies across the centuries. The authors have engaged their readers with some delightful analogies. I particularly enjoyed Carol's comparisons with swimming and Ann's use of the 'nose' tale from Asimov. Each author has chosen excerpts from favourite books, poetry, plays or quotations to captivate their audience from the beginning of their chapters. I enjoyed this and I think others will, too. Practitioners are readers of stories, as well as raconteurs. Stories enrich our lives as well as helping us to understand others' lives from their perspective – surely an inherent part of the ability to reflect on our relationships within the workplace? Mandy Duncan introduces Chapter 7 with a particularly apt poem as she starts her investigation into racism; it includes many powerful points for practitioners to consider as they make a response to the children with whom they work. She continues in Chapter 8 starting with a quote from Nelson Mandela, then offers a number of hard-hitting examples of childhood poverty and its effects from across the world. The story of Bob and his Bugatti certainly made me reflect deeply on the self-righteous assumption I had made from my comfortable settee. Throughout, the authors have not shied away from confronting difficult topics and often take a novel approach in their reflections. In Chapter 10, Carol, Mandy and Ann have revisited multi-agency working and its inherent problems but have stressed the centrality of the child rather than the issues of working together; this central premise, to my way of thinking, is often neglected in battles, for example, over professional status and funding. Also within this chapter is a discussion of Bentham and his Panopticon. Along with Ruth's considerations on emotional availability in Chapter 6 and Carol's reworking of observation and assessment in Chapter 5, this raised crucial questions about the environment in which small children and their families find themselves in today's society. So much data is now collected on our children, two-year-olds are targeted in the move to prevent failure and mothers are to be surveyed to ensure there are strong emotional attachments to their children; but we have to be sure, once again, that as practitioners we place the child's needs foremost, not subject them to the needs of the state. This book gives us the language to be able to do what is best for children.

Jayne has brought new insights to leadership in Chapter 9, again stressing the centrality of the child and an ethical and moral commitment to leading our teams in a way which supports us in ensuring this focus endures. Carol ends in Chapter 11 with a reflection on managing change and how using action research can help to do this.

I have left my reflection on Jayne Daly's Chapter 4 till last, not because this implies any anxiety about its content but because what she had to say plays such an important part in how Early Years practitioners, whether in their first post in nursery or school or as childminders, feel about themselves. Recently the main emphasis on transition has applied to the moves that affect children – out of the home to nursery, nursery to school and so on. Here, Jayne has looked at the transitions that concern adults. She cleverly uses themes from 'Educating Rita' as an introduction and never underestimates the impact a move, say, to university has on an adult, particularly those from a non-traditional background. When I first started to lecture at university, I spent months, perhaps years, thinking someone would expose me. I

did not feel worthy of this appointment, what did I have to offer, I was not clever enough … it took me a while to realise that so many in our field felt like this (mostly women!) but rarely felt secure enough to share their feelings. I so wish I had had a book like this, but I thank my students for giving me the confidence I needed. What this book does is to make us think deeply about our strengths as well as our flaws and recognise our ability to accept new circumstances and change. Well done, girls.

Angela D Nurse, June 2014

1 The nature of reflective practice

CAROL HAYES

Harry stared at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery white state swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

'What is it?' Harry asked shakily.

'This? It is called a Pensieve,' said Dumbledore. 'I sometimes find, and I am sure that you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.'

'Err,' said Harry who couldn't truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

'At these times,' said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, 'I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.'

(J K Rowling, 2000)

What is reflection?

Can you swim? When you go to the swimming pool do you dive in with a flourish or do you lower yourself into the water carefully and with trepidation? Are you comfortable at the deep end where you cannot put your feet down or do you wade in slowly ensuring that you know how to get back?

Reflection is a little like this. You can lean over the pool looking at the blue water glistening in the sunlight and see your reflection looking back at you and while the pool is not disturbed your image is clear and easy to see. Once other people enter the pool the water starts to move and ripple and your reflection gets more difficult to assess. When children enter the water, the splashing and energy with which they engage makes it even harder to see your reflection clearly.

When you see your reflection in the water do you say

- *Oh look there's me?* or
- *Is this what I want to be like?*

When you look into the water do you see who you expect to see or can you see someone else at your shoulder? Those of you who are confident swimmers, like confident practitioners, are happy to take the plunge and accept the challenges of the deep water with no armbands or life jacket. As you dive in, the water opens up for you to see as you explore the depths of the pool, touching the bottom, perhaps gathering new things from the floor of the pool. These practitioners perfect their style and levels of confidence by listening to friends and instructors, talking to others who have observed them and perhaps reading about how water is displaced, aerodynamic shapes, speed and velocity.

However, most of us slip gingerly into the cold pool, putting a toe into the water of reflective practice; needing instructors to keep us afloat and to help us to take our feet off the bottom, change our style and review our practices.

It is common to hear Early Years practitioners say:

- *We can do the job so why do we need to do more?*
- *I have been in the job for the last 30 years and have vast experience; I do not need to do more.*
- *Forget about what you were taught in college. This is the real world!*

Sylva et al (2004) documented, in The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project, that Early Years settings run by critically reflective, well-qualified staff were more effectively run, more reflective and more open to change and challenge. The evidence for the importance of reflective practice is so compelling that it cannot be ignored any more.

Like the experienced swimmer and diver, the reflective practitioner is the one with vision, the ability to judge the depth of the water, the temperature of the water and the content of the water and has creative flair as they dive. With this ability they are able to be responsive and creative in their practice. The experienced swimming instructor is there to take you by the hand and guide you through further training, which will give you better understanding, develop your confidence and resilience and encourage your reflection upon events, critical incidents and experiences past, present and future. So too is a book like this designed to take you through the processes and hold your hand when the reflection appears scary, to raise your levels of confidence and your image as an advanced practitioner.

Reflection could be considered a synonym for 'thought process' which involves looking back at events and asking questions, looking forward and crystal ball gazing. Reflection involves a self-assessment or self-appraisal of practice and competence at a given time and in a given situation. It is about looking for learning points within the reflection, about striving for better understanding and eventually identifying future developmental needs.

Is there really a definition?

The original definition of reflection in education probably came from Dewey (1933), who discusses reflection in the light of professionalism, and this was developed further by Schön (1983), into a process he called 'reflective practice'. How often have you heard the phrase *That's all very well in theory but what about here in the nursery, what use is that here in the real world?* from practitioners looking for real solutions to real problems? However, Schön (1983) saw this as a serious misunderstanding of the relationship of theory to practice. He thought that attributing to professionals knowledge and autonomy in their work granted them extraordinary rights and privileges in return for their very special contribution to society. His concern about this led to his idea that there are two types of reflection, reflection on action and reflection in action.

Reflection on action

Reflection on action is looking back, so it can only be done retrospectively, once the situation has happened and a possible solution has been found. This then involves asking questions such as:

- *Are these the right solutions?*

- *Are there other solutions?*

- *What would be the consequences if different solutions had been found?*

If you are a driver you could liken this to replaying a 'near miss' in your mind; as a practitioner this is perhaps an incident with a parent that was not resolved satisfactorily – the scenario of *If only I had … .*

Reflection in action

As a concept this is more debatable, and you could question whether it is even possible to reflect while entrenched within the situation. As a driver there are times when actions are unconscious, for example changing gears and braking. For the practitioner this might be routines such as reading a story or serving a meal. You do them automatically, but reflecting in action is when you switch to conscious mode and start to 'think on your feet'. This might involve changing the activity in response to a new situation which has occurred and drawing more consciously on a range of familiar strategies. Schön's representation of reflection could perhaps appear to be somewhat simplistic or account insufficiently for the context and background of the reflection. Moon (1999) questions whether it is even achievable to reflect at the time and suggests that you need to step away from the situation and look back in context and time. However, looking back into the past can be limited by perception and what you remember, and if you ask several people what they remember about the same incident they will often 'remember' it differently. Psychologists such as Hunter (1970) have shown that the further away in time you are from a situation the less you remember about it and, more disturbingly, you may even appear to remember things related to the event that never

transpired. Interestingly, in the legal system this is readily recognised and statements relating to an incident are known to be more accurate if they are taken as soon as possible or within 24 hours of the incident taking place (HSE, 2003). Hunter (1970) demonstrated that recollections on the second day have a few inaccuracies but, by the third day, the inaccuracies of the second day were taken as real memories and further inaccuracies occurred. In fact, incorrect responses to memories increase exponentially with the passage of time even when given by a competent professional under favourable conditions, so completely accurate recall is rare (Hunter, 1970). This response to memory can also be influenced by the practitioner's own values, culture, education, age, prejudices and assumptions (HSE, 2003). This emphasises the importance of reflecting upon the 'here and now' and even reflecting into the future, that is, on what you would like to happen, with a commitment to your extended professionalism. The more you do something, the more routine an activity is, the less likely you are to think about it, so activities in the nursery such as toileting, meal times and greeting times are often taken for granted and less likely to be put under the spotlight of scrutiny and reflection. The process of choosing which activities to reflect upon can also be a difficult one, with practitioners often feeling that small events or routines are not worthy of close examination, wanting to reflect upon large projects, major incidents and key moments in the day. Frequently you may want to reflect upon things that went wrong, debating how they could have been better or how they could be avoided, but it is as important to reflect upon the things that you do well, and consider why they are so good and what makes them this way. In the things that go well you can see good practice that could be replicated in other contexts and used as solutions to the difficult moments or to help other situations that you find more challenging. It is important to reflect upon good practice to ensure that it remains so, and that it is challenged from time to time as groups change, systems change and contexts are different. Could the good practice be 'even better practice' or even 'outstanding practice'? The process of reflection in action, therefore, really means thinking about your assumptions and the everyday things that you take for granted. This does not imply that you need change for the sake of change, but that you develop a deeper understanding of your own practice and of why you do the things in the way that you do, that is to seek a rationale for their existence.

The whole concept of reflection moved on from Dewey and Schön and Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) describe reflection as:

> *an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it.*

(p 43)

This is clearly a much broader and more fluid description and like Moon (1999) it equates reflection with learning. Moon (1999) suggests that you can reflect upon things for which there is not necessarily an obvious solution, and associates reflection with a range of feelings which can be emotional and even spiritual, but certainly a part of the mental processing. Moon (1999) also develops the concept of reflection by emphasising the purposive nature of the process. You usually reflect upon something in order to have an outcome, a solution, so it becomes a processing of knowledge, understanding and emotion:

a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is no obvious solution.

(Moon, 1999, p 23)

Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) brought into the process the concept of analysis, ie that reflection starts with an element of curiosity, of asking questions and questioning accepted assumptions:

through reflection and analysis we strive to understand the experience,

(p 23)

Ruch (2002), like Schön, saw the importance of theory and research to the reflective process. She saw that practitioners are often reluctant to see research in the light of real experiences and tend to dismiss them as theoretically remote, impracticable and unusable. This builds upon Schön (1983) who talked about the 'technical rationality' where knowledge is divorced from experience, and the values and understanding that underpin practice are never questioned. Some practitioners believe that this is the way that it has always been done and do not question whether it is still appropriate despite possible changes to the team, changes in customer expectation, changes to the physical fabric of the setting or changes of local and national politics and policy over the years.

The reflective process

The human brain probably processes some 50,000 to 60,000 thoughts every day. As we encounter difficulties and problems in our daily lives we consult what Raelin (2002) calls our 'solution database', which contains all the elements that we have learned in the past to find answers to everyday problems. Of course accepting this means that there is a finite number of possible solutions and no elements of the database will enable us to tackle new, and so far unencountered, problems. This method of problem solving does not allow you to think 'outside the box'. However, by thinking about thinking and other such metacognitive processes, by reflecting on your thoughts and those of others, you are able to add to your 'solution database', to expand ideas and give new meaning to old ideas and older situations. Clearly this type of personal reflection demonstrates great benefit to professional practice, enabling new solutions, creative ideas and imaginative, resourceful thinking to flow into settings. By sharing your reflections with others you open up your thoughts and assumptions to public scrutiny and public examination, but this also allows your thinking to incorporate the ideas of others and you can thereby learn from your actions.

Every situation you may find yourself in will be different – different contexts, different employment cultures, different relationships and so on. Although your existing 'solution database' can lead you in certain directions and give clues for solutions, if no two situations are the same then it is likely that no two solutions will be the same either. This implies that, as you look at a new situation, you need to look for similarities with what you have already experienced, but you also need to look at the differences.

So you should put into the reflective process what you already know or believe, but add new material from your observations, from research, from peers, colleagues and even the children and families in your care, and then draw out something that relates to the reason for that reflection in the first place.

Grushka, Hinde-McLeod and Reynolds (2005) bring in a further suggestion of 'reflection for action'. This they describe as prospective reflection, and some refer to this as crystal ball gazing, allowing the practitioner to consider where they want to be in the future, reflection upon future developments, meeting perceived needs or career planning. However, the crystal ball gazing should not be so introspective that it becomes naval gazing, which narrows the process to such an extent that it ceases to take account of the wider context and the epigenesis (that is the bi-directional relationship) between the environment and the person. Prospective reflection can be likened to looking through a holiday brochure before you go away. You get ideas of what it might be like, what you might do, or who you might meet. It is like superimposing yourself into the picture and imagining the feelings, actions and experiences that will ensue, enabling you to be more prepared when you finally meet with this experience in the future.

So what is reflective practice?

Reflective practice requires practitioners who already see themselves as active researchers and learners, who explore their values and benefits and regularly set learning goals for themselves and their settings. It is about looking beyond reflection to a wider context which incorporates care and education in a political sphere, the curriculum, pedagogy and innovation. Not all practitioners are reflective learning practitioners and for many the learning stopped when they left formal education with their licence to practice. This is often evident in the quality of their practice and the experiences that they offer to the children in their care as well as their resistance to change and a change culture, as highlighted by the Nutbrown Review (2012).

> *An individual does not stop learning and developing once they have completed their initial training and become qualified … they need further training to enhance and develop their knowledge and skills, and to keep pace with new research and developments.*
>
> (Nutbrown, 2012, p 4.23)

CASE STUDY

The brush-off

Practitioner: *Following my discussion with the parents of James, I am really concerned that we are not connecting with parents enough and the concept of parent partnership in the nursery is not working as well as it should. I would like to propose that we have a meeting with parents and staff to discuss this and find out how we could develop this relationship further.*

Manager: *Thank you for that suggestion but you will not remember that we did have a meeting a couple of years ago, before you arrived at the nursery, and it really did not work with only two parents turning up. The staff felt that it was a waste of time.*

Reflective activity

» *How do you think that the practitioner should react to the manager?*

» *How could you further develop the relationship with James' parents?*

» *What advantages can you see for James and the other staff within the nursery?*

It is apparent that the manager in the case study is entrenched in her ideas and closed to any concept of change. Perhaps she even feels threatened by a practitioner who appears critical of the system that she has been responsible for for some time. There is no suggestion by the manager that reflecting upon what has happened in the years since parent partnership policies were last reviewed would achieve anything, despite the change in team, in customer base and the inspectoral requirements. If the manager continues to block new ideas and resist change and suggestions, there is a danger that eventually staff will give up thinking about what they are doing and will no longer strive for improvement through their reflection. This could produce a stagnation of the processes and procedures within the setting, which could leave children with a bland and unvisionary experience, lacking in creativity, thereby reducing the learning environment to one of benign and limited means.

Raelin (2002) describes reflective practice as the:

practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment. It illuminates what the self and others have experienced, providing a basis for further action. In particular, it privileges the process of enquiry, leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice.

(p 1)

The whole concept of reflective practice therefore carries multiple meanings, from solitary introspection to a critical dialogue of thinking and learning. Some have described this solitary dialogue as nothing more than self-indulgent but Ghaye (2000) refers to this inter-subjective reflection or the relational context and mutual collaboration as a 'reflective conversation'. Practitioners can formalise it and record it, even manufacture it, as may be required for inspection purposes, or it may be a more ongoing and fluid experience which goes unrecorded and undocumented, but is nevertheless helpful as practitioners strive to make sense and meaning of the moral and social values that underpin their work.

CASE STUDY

Triggers Nursery

Triggers Nursery is a long-established setting of over 20 years. Many of the staff have been at the setting since the start. The nursery originally attracted large numbers of mono-cultural middle-class families, but over the years the demographics of the community have changed and these children and families have slowly been replaced by children from immigrant families, often with a poor grasp of English speaking skills and largely unemployed and on benefits.

As the population shifted many of the staff found themselves unable to understand the cultural lives of the children and their families and the quality of practice within the nursery started to decline, affecting the whole ethos of the setting.

Reflective activity

» *Imagine that you are the new manager of Triggers Nursery. How would you start to address the issues of equipping your staff with the reflective tools required to help them to better understand the dynamics and new remit of the setting?*

» *How would you create an open and unthreatening working environment where staff feel able to discuss their feelings and values with no fear of prejudice or reprisal?*

Reflective models

If you have looked at other texts on reflective practice you will have noted that there are almost as many models of reflective practice as there are writers in the field. Why is there such a proliferation of differing models of reflection? Is it just that researchers and writers cannot agree what it is, or do the models described simply lack consensus and clarity? Some of the key models are examined here to allow you a flavour of their similarities and differences. Most start by describing an incident and then encourage use of your own knowledge, that of your peers and colleagues, and evidence from theory and research in an attempt to understand what has been described.

The reflective pyramid

This relationship between the various forms of knowledge can be seen more easily as pyramidal (see Figure 1.1).

- *At the top of the pyramid is you – your personal reflection on your own life, aspirations, career plans, values and emotions*.

- Further down is what you share with your colleagues and peers. Consider how much you let them into your thoughts and reflections, and how much is within your control. Revealing your reflections can be likened to the 'dance of the seven veils' in which the dancer removes one veil at a time before exposing herself completely.
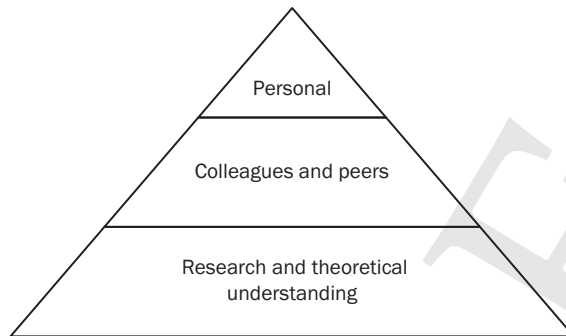
Figure 1.1 *The reflective pyramid*

- At the base of the pyramid is research and theoretical understanding and this really is the rock upon which all the rest is founded. You may not always appreciate how much this influences your everyday practice. It is not just your own understanding of the theories that you learned in college or through your reading, but it is how the wider context of government and society is influenced by new theoretical understanding and discovery that affects your conversations with colleagues and your own internal conversations. This in turn will allow you to see yourself within that context and how this will affect your practice. All models vary in how prescriptive they are but need to be seen not as a straitjacket – rigid, inflexible and mechanistic – but as a tool for learning. Different models may suit different contexts or the same context at different times. No one model will suit all of the people all of the time. Different models continue to be written to accommodate different professional groups and different groups within those professions. It is therefore likely that it is neither possible nor even desirable to use one definitive model.

The Kolb Cycle

Although Kolb (1984) is frequently referred to in the context of reflection, the Kolb Cycle is just as often referred to as the Kolb Learning Cycle. Kolb has been criticised by Boud et al (1985) for not specifically detailing the process of reflection within his diagram. However, the whole model is based very firmly in practice and in the personal experiential experience. Kolb lays great store by the importance of observation and in particular reflective observation (which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

However, maybe experience is not enough. The practitioner who claims to have been in the job for 20 years and therefore has 20 years of experience to call upon when making decisions, could have had 20 years of the same experience and have been doing the same thing in the same way for all that time without really reflecting upon this in an intelligent and reflexive manner.

The Kolb model also talks of 'abstract conceptualisation', which moves from practical experience through an understanding of the 'why' as well as the 'what'. This is the point at which the reflective practitioner needs to say:

- *This is what I do but why do I do it like this?*

- *Are there other solutions, maybe better solutions, to the problems?*
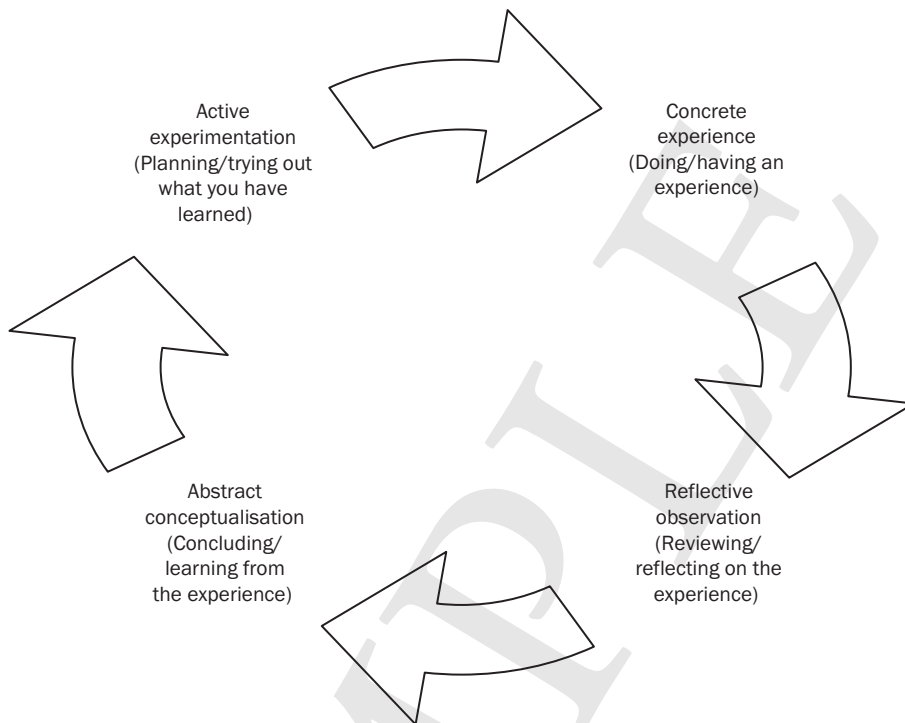
Figure 1.2 *Kolb's Reflective Cycle (1984)*

The practical experience is shaped and developed by an abstract conceptualisation of the issue. In Kolb's cycle this leads into planning and trying out some of the new ideas that have been developed from that interplay between theory and practice. Kolb (1984) can be accused of being too simplistic and sequential and lacking in an understanding of the effect that emotion can play on change and the reason for change at a particular time in a particular way. Kolb, like Schön, was concerned only with observable behaviour, what he called the 'objective observer', and the thoughts, feelings and values of a practitioner are not seen as important to the reflective process. This objectivity and evidence-based theorising is beneficial to the researcher as it appears open and transparent, and on the surface appears to add reliability to the model. However, it also has the potential to seriously limit the validity and reliability of the reflection by failing to recognise the part played beneath the surface by feelings, emotions, cultural values and moral dilemmas in the reflective process, which brings into sharp question its worth and merit.

Gibbs' Cycle

Gibbs (1998) attempted to build on Kolb's model and to incorporate an understanding of these emotive responses into a developed model (see Figure 1.3). Gibbs attempted to respond to the human nature element of reflection. However, as this is a frequently unseen element, a moving variable that cannot easily be replicated or understood, it is difficult to describe within a one-size-fits-all, two-dimensional model.

Action Plan
(If it arose again
what would you
do?)

Description
(What
happened?)

Conclusion
(What else could
be done?)

Feelings
(What are you
thinking and
feeling?)

Analysis
(What sense can
you make of the
situation?)

Evaluation
(What was good/
bad about the
experience?)
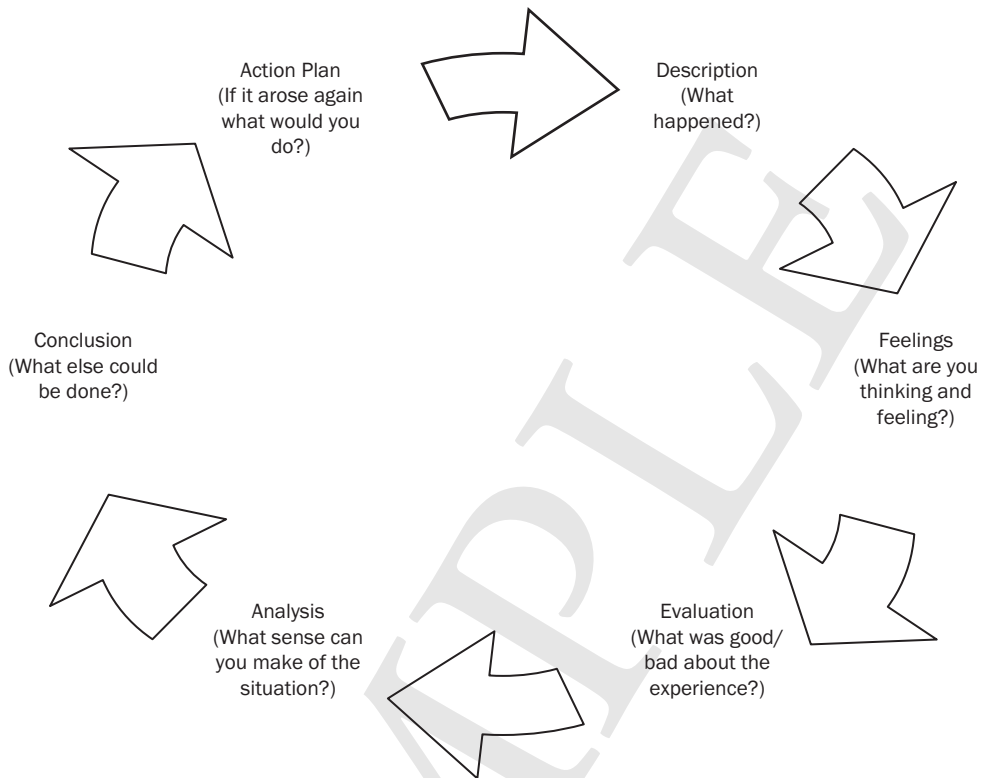
Figure 1.3 *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988)*

However, maybe Gibbs' model is also too simplistic for such a complex process. It is steeped in concerns about practical experiences rather than recognising that the reflective process could be multi-layered and there may be differing levels of reflection. Within these levels it is important to examine the issues of value, change, commitment to quality, differentiation and diversity.

Jay and Johnson: three-tier classification

Jay and Johnson (2002), developed a three-tier classification of reflection based on a series of questions for the practitioner to ask themselves. This typology aimed to recognise this difference of levels and to build upon it by bringing in ethical and moral issues.

One problem with this model is that it does tend to retain Schön's idea of reflection on action, and of reflection only being a retrospective process with little scope for reflection in action or prospective reflection, reflection for action (Grushka, Hinde-McLeod and Reynolds, 2005).

Table 1.1 *Jay and Johnson (2002)*

Descriptive	What is happening? Is this working and for whom? How am I feeling? What do I not understand?
Comparative	How do other people explain what is happening? What do research and theory say? How can I improve?
Critical	Can I look at this from alternative perspectives? Given my own moral and ethical stance which solution is best for this particular issue? How does this reflective process inform and shape my perspective?

Race's ripples model

A model perhaps more suited to the experienced practitioner is Race's updated 'ripples' model (2010) (see Figure 1.4). This is based on the Vygotskian theory (1978) that the best way to learn is to become actively involved in the activity and that the best teachers are those who facilitate children's learning, rather than trying to pour in the learning from the top. Race (2010) places 'learning by doing' at the centre of a pool of water and shows how the ripples fan out from the centre to encompass other types of learning and reflection.

This model is similar to Kolb in that it is dynamic and based on experiential learning but it is not sequential requiring one aspect before and following another. Race describes this as *Intersecting systems of ripples on a pond* (Race, 2010).

Figure 1.4 *The six stages of Race's ripples model of reflection and learning (2010)*

Raelin's five-stage model

Raelin (2002) suggests a five-stage model of reflection:

1. Speaking ... with a collective voice – this is very group-orientated and involves being willing to express some of the uncertainties and assumptions.

2. Disclosing ... sharing doubts, assumptions, impatience and expressing passions. Presenting a story to uncover the depths.

3. Testing ... through open enquiry to uncover possible new ways of thinking. Considering norms and taken-for-granted assumptions.

4. Probing ... non-judgemental consideration of other people's views, drawing out facts, assumptions, reasons and consequences and considering alternatives.

5. Being ... Raelin sees this as the most influential of the five, which can also be referred to as 'mindfulness', an awareness of a situation without trying to input meaning, but considering what we can learn from it and how the practitioner becomes a part of the whole process.

He suggests that, generally, most practitioners do not move beyond a basic approach to problem solving as shown in Figure 1.5.

Figure 1.5 Raelin (2002)

Reflexivity

You have already considered how reflective practitioners engage in critical self-reflection, examining the impact that their own background, culture, assumptions, feelings and behaviour have upon their practice. The reflexive practitioner also takes account of the wider political culture, current ideology, national trends and legislation. To understand the term reflexivity, Finlay and Gough (2003) describe the concept as forming a continuum (see Figure 1.6).

Reflection	Critical reflection	Reflexivity
(Thinking about something)		(Dynamic self-awareness)

Figure 1.6 Finlay and Gough's (2003) reflexive continuum

This demonstrates the bi-directional nature of the relationship between cause and effect and giving meaning to experience. Therefore reflexivity goes beyond reflection allowing us to use our experience to make sense of complex professional judgements. Finlay (2008) talks of reflexivity as having five overlapping variants with critical self-reflection at the core.

- Introspection ... this is the one-to-one dialogue with yourself, thinking about feelings and emotions.

- Inter-subjective reflection ... thinking about the relationship between your practice and the context in which it is set.

- Mutual collaboration ... what Ghaye (2000) calls *reflective conversations*, the dialogical relationship between professionals.

- Social critiques ... this focuses upon the wider cultural and political context within which the professional has to work.

- Ironic deconstruction ... this is the analysis of the discursive practices focusing upon the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning.

Challenges to reflective practice

Although the process of reflection as described here may appear long and complex, there is no need for it to be so and it may involve no more than five minutes at the end of the day to reflect upon the critical moments. It is likely that when people say that they have no time for reflection they are talking about retrospective and prospective reflection. This makes the 'heat of the moment' reflection, what Schön calls reflection in action, all the more important. So the barrier is perhaps not one of time but of willingness to engage each other in reflecting thoughts, feelings and actions.

That reflective practice is desirable and was demanded by the original Early Years Foundation Stage documents (DfES, 2008) is often taken for granted, but does the process really yield satisfactory returns for the time invested in its development? The amended EYFS (DfE, 2012) has much less emphasis upon reflective practice, but it does assume that all Early Years practitioners should be skilful, thoughtful and critical in their practice. Busy and sometimes overstretched practitioners may well feel that reflective practice is difficult and time-consuming and this could result in unthinking and unsatisfactory results. Mechanical checklists of simplistic questions are unlikely to yield a thinking and thoughtful workforce. Answering questions simply to satisfy inspection processes, with answers that the practitioner thinks the inspectorate want to hear, is also of little use to the process. One can understand why some practitioners, whose only experience of reflective practice has been of this sort, would not think that the time invested produces credible and innovative results and solutions.

Clearly the process of reflection should not overwhelm your practice and it needs to be used selectively. One of the aims of the New Labour Government in 2006 was to professionalise the Early Years workforce and raise the quality of provision for young children (DfES, 2006). A set of standards was developed to enable graduates to achieve Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). The two essential elements of this were to be able to lead and change practice and to be a reflective practitioner. This initiative was largely influenced by research conducted by Sylva et al (2004) and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project. This demonstrated that settings run by well-qualified critical thinkers were highly influential in producing the enabling environment required for young children to learn and thrive educationally. It is interesting that the standards of physical care were shown to be less influenced by the qualifications of the staff. According to CWDC (2010a) such critical thinkers

have a clear grasp of reasons why they are acting in particular ways. They recognise their role in improving children's experiences and life chances and in maximising their opportunities. They make decisions based on the depth of their knowledge of the EYFS and relevant theories and research. They are alive to changing circumstances and respond flexibly with children's interests at heart. They review, analyse and evaluate their own and others' practice and then judge whether they are making a difference to the well-being, learning and development of children in their own and colleagues' care.

(Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010, p 7)

This public scrutiny of Early Years practice can clearly be a scary business, opening us up to the risk of ridicule and attack. If you see reflective practice in terms of success and failure then it can seem to be intimidating, which could result in defensiveness and closing down the open-minded thinking it is trying to create. Reflective practice needs to be a continuing process, not something with an end point, viewing every situation, no matter how difficult, as something that can be learned from if you have the mindset to improve and go forward with grit and determination. You need to move from an approach which asks:

- *What is right?*

- *What is good practice?*

to a more inquisitorial approach of:

- *How can I create effective learning environments? and*

- *How can I develop my setting to offer accessible and equitable practices?*

Reflective practice is not going to be effective if the profession as a whole or the setting/ workplace does not value its role in providing for the environment with coercive institutional practices. Boud and Walker (1998) suggest that managers of settings need to work hard to provide a working environment that supports both individual and collegiate reflections and one that encourages staff to challenge the dominant culture and practice. This can be difficult and has the potential to promote discord and an entrenchment of negative views as they challenge the issues of power and control.

a culture that permits questioning of assumptions is difficult to tolerate because it requires that people in control lose their grip on the status quo.

(Raelin, 2002, p 68)

As a practitioner you therefore need confidence in your practice if you are to engage with an honest self-appraisal and belong to a strong and cohesive working team which is able to confront its working processes and outcomes. A team willing to embrace change and transformation can engage with the whole reflective process in a non-threatening and supportive capacity. This also allows the capacity to co-construct understanding, ideas and meaning alongside the children (see Figure 1.7).
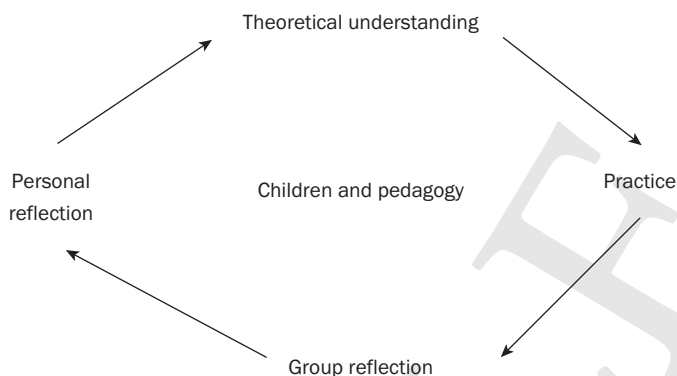
Figure 1.7 Co-construction of meaning

Reflecting, with the children taking a more active role in the process of co-constructing their learning, can have benefits for all parties. Through discussion and sustained shared thinking, the children can be encouraged to ask questions and most importantly to look for solutions to their own problems creating learning from within rather than from above.

Another challenge could be that even using the term 'practitioner' could deter reflection. A practitioner is perceived as being involved with 'practice', a culture of 'doing', a busy person constantly on the move, rather than a thinker, reflector and researcher. Whilst there is much debate about the difference between a practitioner and a professional, a professional is more associated with words such as conscientious, engaging in constant evaluation, reflection and striving for excellence.

Ethical issues

Practitioners engaged with reflective practice need to consider the risks involved with moral judgement and ethical concerns. Issues of sensitivity to confidentiality, privacy, informal disclosure, rights, consent and professional relationships must be explored. There may also be consideration of how reflections should be shared, when they should be shared and with whom. Such in-depth introspective thinking can potentially be what Brookfield (1990) called 'psychologically explosive'. This constant striving for improved practice could result in a lack of confidence in the practitioners and loss of self-esteem, resulting in negative attitudes to practices.

Seeing ourselves as life-long learners within the setting is probably the first step to engaging with reflective practice as well as understanding how practitioners making sense of their own beliefs, values and perceptions has important implications for their practice, teaching and learning with the children.

Reflective activity

Identify someone in your past who was a favourite teacher/carer/playgroup leader, etc. What characteristics do you think they had that make you remember them so many years later?

» *Make a list of their characteristics as you remember them.*

» *How do you think that you compare to these?*

The first one has been done as an example.

Characteristics of my favourite practitioner	Characteristics of me as a practitioner
He was understanding and tried hard to comprehend why I found something hard to do.	I try hard to see an incident from a range of perspectives.

» *Now examine the list of your characteristics and consider a recent incident in your practice; how do you think these affected the way in which you dealt with the episode?*

» *Can you find an example of each of your characteristics in your own experience?*

Chapter reflections

What we have seen in this chapter is that reflective practice is often hard to do effectively. The nature of the activity changes with context, different environments, organisations and relationships and all of these will demand different ways to reflect. The multiplicity and proliferation of models of reflection show that either there is simply a lack of consensus about a definition of reflective practice or there are genuinely different ways to reflect depending upon the context and area of professional practice. The problem with imposing a specific model is that it leaves little scope for practitioners to draw upon their own professional judgements, feelings and values. The practitioner who unthinkingly follows a particular model could render their practice more mechanical and mechanistic, which is the total opposite of Schön's original idea of 'professional artistry'. This suggests that, although different models are needed for the particular needs of differing professions and contexts within those professions, there is no one model that can be held up as the perfect model and the definitive answer. Reflective practice should be a means to an end and not an end in itself.

> *Models need to be applied selectively, purposefully, flexibly and judiciously.*
> (Finlay, 2008, p 10)

What is ultimately important is that you learn from your reflections and from the investment of time and effort that you put into the process.

» *Pick up on apparently insignificant happenings and connect them to indicate patterns and consequences.*

» *Review issues by looking at them through another person's eyes or seeing things in a new light.*

» *Recognise how your own prior experience, feelings, values and emotions can affect your practice.*

» *Understand the importance of looking for innovative ideas and new creative solutions.*

» *Have the confidence in your own knowledge and practice to try new and innovative ways of approaching tasks.*

If you are privileged to be working with young children and their families you owe it to them to be as knowledgeable, skilful, ethical, moral and reflective as you can be. The following acronym may help you remember the key aspects of reflection:

Regular and relevant

Ethical

Feelings

Learning

Evaluation

Change

Time

CASE STUDY

Aleesha's story

Three weeks after I started at Triggers Nursery I had to deal with a parent complaining about the way a junior member of staff had dealt with their child who had bitten another. I was required to help the staff member to write up the incident in an incident report book. After talking to the parent I was immediately worried. I was scared that I had not said the right things and was unable to answer her questions properly. It felt a bit like when I was train-ing and had to give a presentation about a child being bullied, and the tutor was asking me questions. I didn't know what to say so thought that I could perhaps make up some good answers and bluster my way through it even though this was bluffing! On both occasions that was helpful in maintaining my confidence at the time but it could so easily have gone wrong and I have seen others come unstuck by making it up as they go along.

As I was a new manager it was important to me that all contacts with parents went well and that I could create a good impression, maybe I wanted too much to do well. I now toss and turn in bed at night thinking about it, and feel as though it was a disaster.

I need to think why the conversation with the parent had such an effect on me, my voice was 'wobbly' and my efforts to remain calm were frustrated. Colleagues in the nursery said

afterwards that I looked in control despite what I was feeling, but did they really mean that or were they just trying to be kind?

As I think back maybe it was not as bad as it seemed. My colleagues seem to think that I dealt with the altercation well. Perhaps I need to think about how I will react to such a sensitive situation in the future and maybe I will do some research on the internet for some advice about assertiveness, or perhaps go on that leadership course that they do at the University.

One week later

I am feeling more positive about things now although I am still feeling a bit cross. I have started to read some material about appraising a situation and not letting one thing dominate my life. I think that I understand better now what was happening and this has given me more confidence in my ability to engage with parents in the future. As I write this I realise how useful it is to reflect on things and to write them down so that I can see the same situation from a range of different perspectives. I can see that there were things that I had not thought about in this situation, such as the parent's limited understanding of English, perhaps she had been bullied as a child, or maybe the child was unwell, tired or stressed on the day. I can also see the areas in which I could improve, knowing where I went wrong and admitting to the mistakes has perhaps given me the chance to improve.

Reflective activity

» *What challenges did the manager encounter both personally and professionally?*

» *How do you think that retrospective reflection (reflection on action) helped her to understand what happened?*

» *How could reflection in action have helped her to respond better at the time?*

» *How could prospective reflection help her to plan what she will do in the future?*

» *What could she now share with her colleagues in case they are ever in the same position, so that they could learn from her experience, and how could this be achieved?*

» *Can you think of a situation where you have struggled professionally and could the three types of reflection discussed in this chapter have helped you? Explain your answer.*

Further reading

Hallet, E (2013) *The Reflective Early Years Practitioner*. London: Sage.

This is a very vocationally orientated view of reflective practice which sets reflection into a range of different Early Years contexts. This book has something useful for all levels from level 2 to postgraduate staff, and contains several excellent practical and pedagogical examples to enable you to consider

your problem-solving options. There is a particularly useful chapter to enhance your reading on 'Work-Based Reflective Pedagogy'.

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