**Making reflective practice more effective practice: deepening the process of reflection to improve the quality of teaching and learning in an early years setting**

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**Abstract**

This paper describes an action research project conducted over a period of two years at a large urban nursery school and children’s centre in Bristol. The impetus for the research was a desire to deepen reflective practice in the setting, in order to improve responsive planning and subsequent learning outcomes for children. A collaborative approach was undertaken between a university-based researcher and staff at the setting, and the research design followed a repeated cycle of action and reflection during which data was gathered using mixed methods. The project included professional development training on schemas, emotional patterns in children’s play and reflexivity, to enhance practitioner expertise.

Findings showed that as a result of the project, practitioner knowledge, skills and confidence in being reflective was significantly increased and a subsequent improvement in the quality of learning experiences and outcomes for both children and adults was reported. Staff went on to develop their own model of reflection to use as a framework for responsive planning (The St Paul’s Children’s Centre Reflective Wheel), and now provide training on reflective practice to other early years settings.

**Introduction**

Reflective practice is the cornerstone of effective early years pedagogy (Reed and Canning, 2010; Paige-Smith and Craft, 2011). Reflecting on how children are learning, the best conditions for it, and how to improve it, is an on-going challenge for all early years practitioners. However, reflective processes can become habitual, resulting in monotonous and predictable outcomes.

The impetus for this research project came from the Head Teacher of a large, urban nursery school and children’s centre who recognised that despite well-established reflective processes for staff (and daily ‘responsive planning’ meetings), the learning opportunities being offered to children could still become repetitive, potentially inhibiting children’s learning. She observed that their interpretation of extending children’s interests was primarily around planning resources.

The aim of the project therefore, was to challenge the assumptions being made by practitioners, deepen their reflections and enable them to go beyondthe literal and obvious to a more conceptual understanding of children’s learning, and make responsive planning truly responsive to children’s needs.

The research questions generated were:

* What are the barriers to deepening reflection?
* Can knowledge of: schemas, emotional patterns in children’s play, and reflexivity, improve the quality of practitioner reflection and responsive planning?
* What practical outcomes can be used to improve teaching and learning in the setting?

**Methodology**

Basit writes; ‘action research is a self-critical enquiry which can be effectively used to bring about change on a small scale’ (2010:23). She goes on to suggest that it appeals to practitioners because it enables them to make sense of, and improve, their practice in a way that takes account of their own experience as well as those they are working with. She cites Schostak (2002) who refers to action research as a ‘process of systematic reflection’, and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) who define it as ‘a form of collective self-reflective enquiry’ (in Basit 2010: 24-25). If action research is interpreted as essentially a process of reflection then it follows that it is the perfect tool for a research study which is itself on the nature of reflection. Using an action research methodology is congruent with the notion of meta-reflection (Clark, 2009) as it usefully enables practitioners to ‘reflect on reflection’.

Elliott (1991) defines action research as a process where hypotheses are validated *through* practice rather than being validated independently and then applied *to* practice. This research project fulfils Elliott’s criteria in that it evolved as the result of an identified need particular to the setting, and generated hypotheses which were tested and modified through everyday practice, over time. In this case, the action research was a collaborative approach between the researcher (Hilary Smith, Bath Spa University) and the client (Lucy Driver, Head of St Paul’s Nursery School and Children’s Centre) to ‘develop solutions to an identified problem’ (Bryman, 2012:709).

The project was conducted over a two year period following a cyclical process based on McNiff and Whitehead’s model of Generative Transformational Evolutionary Process (2002: 57) in which the action-reflection steps are identified as: plan, act, observe, reflect. This research project followed a repeated pattern of: research design (plan), focused professional development (act), data-gathering (observe), analysis (reflect).

**Data Gathering**

Data was captured using a mixed method approach (Cresswell, 2003). Entry and exit questionnaires used a Likert Scale to gather information on practitioners’ knowledge, skills and levels of confidence in reflective practice and responsive planning. Training Evaluations provided qualitative data using open-ended questions focussing specifically on training outcomes immediately after the event. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their assumptions and concerns as the project evolved; and non-participant observations of responsive planning sessions by the researcher were used at regular intervals to identify patterns of practice over time.

**Professional Development Training Sessions**

The cycle of action research conducted in this project included professional development training sessions to support and develop practitioner knowledge and skills. In the first cycle, data gathering identified some knowledge gaps, which resulted in planned training on: observing schemas in children’s play and recognising possible emotional needs being expressed through those patterns. In the second cycle, as well as re-visiting these themes, the training focus was on raising awareness of personal reactions to children’s behaviour, recognising limiting assumptions and considering alternative responses.

The training was based on theoretical concepts of: schemas, emotional intelligence, and reflexivity.

1. Schemas (and emotional patterns in children’s play)

The observable, repeated patterns of play that young children engage in are commonly known as Schemas. Piaget identified schematic behaviour in terms of a theory of learning (Piaget, 1951) which was later extensively researched and developed by Chris Athey during the 1970s. Subsequent research and practice has shown that schema theory can be a powerful tool in helping us make sense of, and support, children’s play and learning and is widely used in early years settings (Athey, 2007; Nutbrown, 2006).

Identifying children’s schemas helps practitioners and parents to have a shared understanding and language for play behaviours; while children use schemas to help them make sense of the world, adults use their observations of schemas to help them make sense of children’s learning. Once a schema is identified, it can often provide relief for parents who are worried that their child’s behaviour is unusual or obsessive and then they can feel more engaged in supporting and encouraging their play. For practitioners it can provide the basis for more meaningful alongside interactions with children as well as liberate them from feeling they have to come up with endless new resources and ideas; it can facilitate a greater trust in child-initiated processes.

Whilst the practice of observing and supporting schemas is widespread in early years settings, connecting them with emotional patterns is a relatively new idea. Cath Arnold conducted research on this, explicitly relating children’s play patterns with their internal emotional world. Drawing on Bowlby’s attachment theory (Holmes, 1997), therapeutic models (Winnicott, 1991; Trevarthen, 2003) and notions of emotional well-being (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007), Arnold provides a range of case studies to illustrate that children can communicate, and make sense of, their feelings through schematic behaviour (Arnold, 2010 and 2012). One example she gives is of a child, Edward, who was very distressed when his mum said goodbye and left him with his key person but was instantly relieved and happy after hooking up a door fastening, and then spent several minutes repeatedly unhooking and hooking it up. She concludes that Edward has a connection schema and that his actions with the door hook enabled him to resolve his feelings of loss and separation (Arnold 2010:75).

During this part of the training, activities to help develop participants’ understanding of schemas included watching video material of children’s play patterns, as well as analysing children’s mark-making in the light of Athey’s taxonomy (2007). This was linked to emotions through discussions of recent observations of children in practitioners’ own key groups.

2. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional well-being and emotional resilience are concepts now widely recognised in early education and acknowledged more broadly in the statutory guidance provided for practitioners in England, (DfE 2014) with equivalent guidance in Scotland (LTS 2008) and Wales (DCELLS 2008). Personal, Social and Emotional development (PSED) is identified as one of the Prime areas of learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE 2014) and the emphasis this gives to the emotional, or affective, aspect of learning offers a precedent for practitioners to be emotionally literate themselves (Weare and Gray, 2003; Roberts, 2006).

For educators to understand the affective dimensions of learning it is helpful if they recognise that not only do emotions drive cognitive learning, but that in order to generate successful learning outcomes, they need to explicitly engage with young children’s internal emotional worlds (Rose, Gilbert and Smith *in* Ward, 2013). The participants in this project were already broadly knowledgeable in aspects of children’s emotional development and the setting had already adopted practices to promote emotional literacy (DCSF, 2008b) but in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of these concepts, the professional development training sessions on understanding emotions were based on the theory of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1996; Caruso, Mayer and Salovey, 2004; Sharp, 2014; Weare, 2004).

In order to support this aspect of the training, it was essential to establish an emotionally safe space from the outset to enable open and honest discussions, and to provide regular opportunities for participants to express their feelings both verbally and non-verbally. This was achieved through agreeing ground rules (based on the setting’s own ‘Learning Community Contract’) and by providing clarity about confidentiality. The training also included a range of feedback activities (solitary, in pairs, and in small groups) to ensure every participant felt included and had a voice.

The identified skills of emotional literacy: self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman,1996; Weare, 2004; DfES 2005) were embedded throughout the training but brought to light at key points in reference to participants’ own learning as well as when reflecting on children’s learning.

3. Reflexivity

An important aspect of any reflective process is self-awareness. By stepping back and considering our own perspective, questioning why we think what we do, and being open to our own prejudices and assumptions, we can have a better understanding of our reactions to others. In an early years context, it can be crucial in helping practitioners find the most appropriate response to children’s behaviour. Reflecting through an ‘autobiographical lens’ (Brookfield, 2005) is sometimes described as being ‘reflexive’ and has been defined as: ‘focusing close attention on one’s own actions, thoughts, feelings, values, identity, and their effect upon others, situations and social and professional structures’ (Bolton, 2010:10).

The training on reflexivity included the use of photographs of children playing, to trigger personal and multiple interpretations and help unravel practitioner assumptions about the learning occurring. This activity was influenced by the work of Pink (2001) who, in her analysis of the use of visual images to extract meaning, recognised the resulting fluidity of perspectives, and its effectiveness in supporting a reflexive approach.

Additional activities to encourage reflexivity also included the use of focussed questioning to provoke practitioner memories of particular children they worked with, and reveal internal dialogues of their responses to those childrens’ play behaviour. This technique was drawn from the Socratic traditions of Philosophy in Education (Pring, undated) and in particular, the work of Bramall and Williams (2012) on using questioning within a ‘community of inquiry’ to support critical thinking.

**Key Findings**

By the end of the project the exit questionnaires demonstrated that practitioners’ knowledge, skills and confidence in being reflective was significantly increased. The interview data revealed that practitioners **r**ecognised the value of reflexivity and were more aware of their own emotional responses to children’s learning behaviours. Observations of responsive planning meetings showed that practitioners were utilising their understanding of schemas and emotional patterns in children’s play to inform their observations and deepen their reflections on children’s learning.

The project also resulted in staff developing their own model of reflective practice to inform their work. Called The St Paul’s Children’s Centre Reflective Wheel, it encapsulates the elements used to both reflect-*in*-action (reflecting in the moment) and reflect-*on*-action (reflecting after the event) (Schön, 1987) which is demonstrated by all staff in their interactions with children. In addition, the term ‘Reflective Noticing’ emerged from the project as a way of describing how we interpret what children are thinking and feeling through a process of observing and ‘wondering’, that goes beyond the obvious and literal and takes account of children’s internal emotional landscapes as well as their external behaviours. It is a practice which has enhanced the experiences and outcomes for both children and adults at the setting and made a real difference to the quality of learning.

Two years on, the staff team have now fully embedded this learning and give full recognition to the significance of personal histories and reflexivity, as evidenced in their vision.

The staff have deepened their understanding of children’s play and explorations which has given them space to be researchers themselves and co-constructors in children’s learning.

They recognise that early interpretation of children’s learning and lines of enquiry can often be inappropriate, inhibiting the children’s questioning of the world around them. The practitioners also engage the parents in interpreting children’s patterns of play and capture their voice in the process of documentation.

The team now use longer observations of children over time to inform their planning and plan open ended provocations for the children which can run over many weeks. The school has also employed an artist to strengthen this practice. The St Pauls Reflective Wheel is used to support practice across all teams within the setting.

St Pauls Nursery School & Children’s Centre was designated a National Teaching School in 2013. Reflective Noticing is an area of practice which attracts a great deal of interest and the school have designed a CPD programme around it which they provide for other Early Years settings.

One practitioner attending the programme said ‘ this course has shifted my thinking in a way that no other Early Years training has – I need to be responsible for recognising the experiences I bring to my interactions with children and open to looking more deeply at what is going on for them, linking their play patterns to their emotional well-being’.

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