# Developing a culture of learning through reflective practice

by Jan McFarlane

When child care professionals constantly strive to assess and understand the impact of their practice they are engaging in 'reflective practice'. They are open to new ideas, often challenge the 'way we have always done things here' and try to see all the possibilities for extending and deepening their learning. Whatever their level of experience, or the setting, they know that there is always something new to learn.

### What is meant by the term 'reflective practice'?

Reflective practice is about learning from ordinary and interesting situations and from the issues and problems that are part of the daily lives of child care professionals. It is about critically examining not only what happened but why. For example, considering a planned experience that may have been of little interest to the children or one in which the children may have used the materials in a different way than intended. Why did this happen?

Reflective practice guides decision making. By deconstructing or 'pulling apart' experiences and critically examining each aspect of them, child care professionals can gather a wealth of information to guide their decisions about what should be repeated or extended and what might be changed. In this way child care professionals can enrich children's learning and build their own knowledge and skills.

Most child care professionals engage in some form of reflective practice as they spontaneously make decisions in response to events that happen throughout the day or session. They build on children's discoveries by adding materials and extend children's thinking by posing questions or suggesting an alternative way to tackle a problem. This type of reflection-in-action (Schon, as cited in Department of Education and Children's Services, 2008, p. 141) also happens when new situations present themselves or established strategies don't seem to work, and the child care professional experiments with new ones.

Thinking about experiences after the event, reflection-**on**-action (Schon, 2008), allows an

#### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.5, 3.1 and 5.3 OSHCQA Principles: 2.1, 4.1, 8.2 and 8.5

QIAS Principles: 1.6 and 7.4

opportunity for much deeper reflection. It involves thinking about what happened and questioning how and why the adult's practice contributed to, extended or detracted from the children's learning or the child care professional's relationships with families. It also involves exploring alternative approaches. This type of reflection might take place at the end of the day or, in more complex situations, over a period of weeks or even months.

Reflection-**for**-action (Schon, 2008) is a proactive way of thinking about future action. It may be triggered by something that has happened before, but might also involve thinking about something that is going to happen in the future and how the individual or the service might respond. For example, the recent arrival of a large number of refugee families in the local community may prompt child care professionals to think about what this might mean for the service. They may closely examine their current enrolment procedures and communication strategies and consider different approaches to help develop and maintain meaningful relationships with these new children and their families.

### Reflective practice and Child Care Quality Assurance

Quality experiences for children and their families do not just happen - everyone involved in providing and delivering the service must work at it continuously. In a similar way, reflective practice requires a strong commitment to continuous improvement and to lifelong learning.

Both the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) systems and reflective practice promote consultative, collaborative decision making within the service. Reflective practice and CCQA provide opportunities for child care professionals to continually explore their relationships and children's experiences to provide a rich program that is responsive to the needs of all children and

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their families. The increased attention to every aspect of the service that results from reflective practice and participating in CCQA builds strength in child care professional teams and makes learning and professional development part of everyday life within the service.

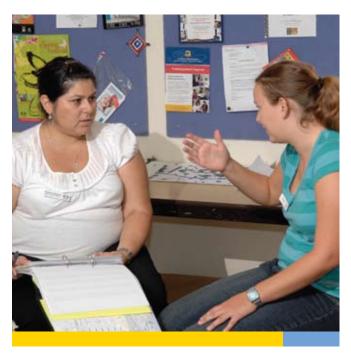
### Using multiple perspectives to assist reflective practice

Each child care professional can engage in reflective practice by closely observing, listening to and critically reviewing what is happening for children throughout the day or session. They may also take some time at the end of the day to think about how the day flowed and how the routines and their own interactions impacted on children's engagement and learning. Samples of children's work, snippets of their conversations and photographs of projects and work in progress add another dimension to this reflective process.

Documentation of children's experiences or projects can be shared with children and their families and they can contribute valuable insights to guide the focus of future planning. Child care professionals can talk with families about the meaning their children took from an experience, and how their experiences outside the service have influenced their thinking about what happened.

Sometimes it is difficult to develop a critical perspective of our own practice and new ideas are better clarified when there is an opportunity to talk to other people about them. Small groups of child care professionals or a whole team may share their reflections on a particular practice at the service or provide additional perspectives on areas being considered by an individual member of the team.

The bigger the question the wider the reflection may need to be. For example, if an issue is being considered that may result in a change to service policies or procedures it is important that management, staff, carers, families and, where possible, children are involved in the reflective process. Looking outside the service and engaging with people, ideas and innovations happening in the wider community may also be appropriate. This can assist child care professionals to ask questions such as: How do others see the issue? What are others doing? What does research tell us?



## Useful strategies to support reflective practice

Child care professionals are more likely to engage in reflective practice when there is a culture of openness and trust and where everyone has a voice and is listened to, not just the most powerful or vocal members of the group. Individuals need to feel that they can question and raise concerns about their own and the service's practice and will not be demeaned for holding an alternative viewpoint.

Recognising that there is no single or 'right' way to approach complex issues is also an important element in supporting reflective practice. Team discussions and debates provide an opportunity for child care professionals to challenge each other and to use their collective knowledge and perspectives to improve practice. For example, they may reflect on a routine or practice and ask questions such as:

- What is the rationale for the way we do that?
   Does it reflect our service philosophy?
- Have we always done it that way?
- Is the practice consistent with our beliefs, values and philosophy?
- Does the practice meet the needs of all children and families?
- What happens in other services? Why do they do that?
- What is best practice?
- If we change it, how will we monitor it?
- When and how should we review and evaluate the change?

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If reflective practice is to become part of everyday life in the service, child care professionals need to be provided with time, space and the opportunity to support their commitment to this. Some of the ways in which this can be achieved include:

- Reviewing staffing arrangements and routines
  to create an environment that is conducive
  to reflective practice. When child care
  professionals have opportunities to engage with
  and closely observe a small group of children
  over a long period of uninterrupted time they
  develop closer relationships with them. This
  allows them a greater insight into children's
  thinking and learning.
- Establishing routines that allow reflection to occur regularly. Each child care professional might take 10 or 15 minutes during scheduled programming time or at the end of the day

- to record their reflections in a journal or diary. A similar amount of time might be allocated during a regularly scheduled meeting to reflect on practice across the service. These meetings also provide a forum for individual team members to talk about a personal experience and invite their colleagues to provide their perspective.
- Encouraging child care professionals to work closely with more experienced colleagues.
   This provides opportunities for both parties to observe, critique and learn from each other; describing what they noticed about a child's response to an experience and asking questions about why their colleague used a particular strategy.
- Networking with other services. Regularly
  meeting with people in the wider community
  can provide insights into the way the service
  and the work of child care professionals are
  perceived by others. This provides opportunities
  to explore ways in which the service can then
  become more responsive to the interests and
  needs of families and children in the local
  community.

#### **Conclusion**

Developing a culture of learning through reflective practice drives continuous improvement in child care services. It focuses attention on the complexity of rich learning experiences for children and provides a space for child care professionals to stand back and question what is happening day-to-day from children's and families' perspectives.

When child care professionals engage in regular reflective practice they find new ways of thinking about their daily work. This inspires them to think flexibly and creatively about how they can support and enrich children's learning

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