

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

(adapted by Elaine Ferguson from "Becoming a Reflective Practitioner", by Carmella Singleton. A PIP Mentoring Skills Series module, used with permission)

What is Reflective thinking?

Reflective thinking is a process that enhances problem solving, program planning and continuous growth and learning in our careers. Some practitioners have developed it through their experience, others by being mentored by colleagues, and others through study and research on reflective practice in their training or self study activities. Wedman, & Martin, (1991) have identified six categories of reflective thinking.

- Questioning: What do I need to know? A statement made to extract and select information.
- Analyzing: Identify components of a situation. Consider how the elements are linked or interact. Recognize personal beliefs, emotions, or biases with regard to a situation.
- Planning: Elaborate on intermediate constructions to explore different sequences of possibilities, easily recognized by conditional constructions like, "if X then Y and if Z...".
- Evaluation-review: Give the good points and the bad ones; appraise; give an opinion regarding the value of; explore the advantages and disadvantages of the situation.
- Evaluation-reconsider: Review the situation and modify the plan if new information or an element of the situation was not previously considered
- Evaluation-decide: Explicit or implicit judgment on performance, easily identified by key words like "no", "yes", "fine", etc. The decision may take you back to reconsideration or reviewing.

The reflective thinking categories of questioning, analyzing, and planning allow early childhood practitioners to re-examine current child care practices. When evaluation allows opportunities for review, reconsideration, and deciding, often there are new insights and understandings that are integrated into the practitioner's practice, improving the quality of their practice.

Self-reflection or the examination of our own values and beliefs is a prerequisite to learning about the importance of reflective thinking to our professional practice. Reflective thinking involves a lifelong, critical examination of our intentions and behaviours. It means looking at what we are doing, what is happening, what are the different reactions to what is happening, what we can change and what the consequences are for our different options. (See the Standard of Practice Reflection Exercise).

What is Reflective practice?

Reflection is a gift we give ourselves, an effort we must approach with some purpose in mind and in some formal way. When we reflect in this manner, the wisdom embedded in our experience is revealed (Killion and Todnem, 1991). Donald Schon (1987) describes reflective practice as a professional activity in which the practitioner reflects both *in-action* and *on-action* in order to enhance or improve her practice. Cogan and Garman (1973) describe a third type of reflection in which the practitioner reflects *for-action*. This is the type of reflection that guides future practice and is the desired outcome of reflection in-action and on-action. Reflecting on past and present action enhances decision making on immediate and future action.

"Learning occurs between a fear and a need" - Peter Senge (2002)

Bellm, Whitebook, and Hnatiuk (1997) propose that this ability to reflect, and to take action on that reflection, is a strategy that requires significant risk taking. Reflecting on one's actions requires going past where one is usually most comfortable. However, Bellm et al believe that when practitioners are able to go beyond that comfort zone and incorporate reflection into their professional lives, they are in fact demonstrating reflective practice. According to these researchers, reflective practices are encouraged in Early Childhood Education Programs when there are structures in place to conference with their colleagues and when opportunities are provided for them to observe one another's teaching practices.



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1200 Tower Rd
Suite 100
Halifax, NS
B3H 4K6

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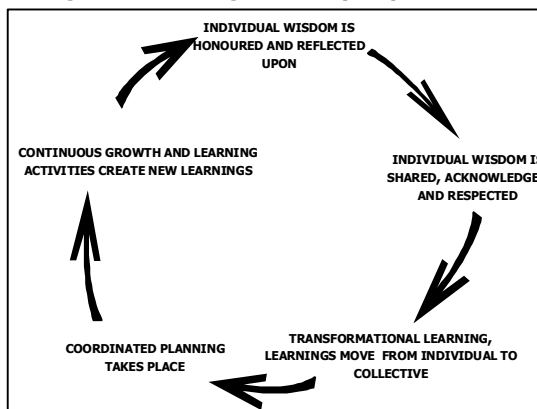
When educators put structures like these in place and allow themselves to develop from within, not only do they become reflective thinkers, but they are also enabled to support each other to become reflective about their interactions with children and adults. (See Reflective Practice Exercises)

Key Aspects of Reflecting on Teaching Practices:

- Recognize your first reactions to the situation. Check for personal biases.
- Be careful of generalizations.
- Avoid quick solutions- try to find the principle involved. Talk about the details of the situation.
- Take time to think.
- Develop questions that will help you explore the situation from a different perspective. What are questions that...
 - would elicit details about a situation?
 - would help you explore different options and their consequences?
 - will help you analyze the situation?
 - will help you weigh and synthesize the situation?
 - will help you evaluate the situation?
- Keep an open mind. Provide criteria for your decisions.

The learning culture cycle process: (McCormick Ferguson, 2003)

Figure 1: Learning culture cycle process



- *Individual Wisdom is honoured and reflected upon ~*
Practitioners are encouraged to decide upon what is needed to enrich the quality of their child care practice. Practitioners are invited to tap into and share their individual wisdom of quality child care practice in an ethic of care within an environment that demonstrates honour, respect and modesty and recognizes

practitioners' needs of belonging, voice and safe reflection.

- *Individual Wisdom is shared, acknowledged and respected ~*
Members of the learning culture share, recognize, trust, value and respect each other's skills, knowledge and abilities, creating an understanding of what is known and what is not known about quality child care practice. They engage in reflective thinking and dialogue to question, analyze, and re-examine their current child care practices.
- *Transformational learning occurs, learning moves from individual to collective ~*
This exchange promotes the integration of perspectives with one's individual thoughts, values, beliefs, knowledge and skills, resulting in transformational learning, learning that moves from the individual to the collective. Safe dialogue and inquiry creates a sense of understanding of what each brings to the relationship and what each requires for their continuous growth and learning. Based on identified needs, members of the learning culture review, reconsider, analyze and integrate new insights and understanding into their practice.
- *Coordinated planning takes place ~*
Partnerships are formed, using an assessment of existing and needed resources; plans are developed to engage in continuous growth and learning activities to achieve quality child care practice.
- *Continuous growth and learning activities create new learning ~*
Plans are implemented; actions evaluated and new learning emerges to continue the learning culture cycle.

Opportunities for reflective thinking to occur across child care practice results in more informed and knowledgeable child care practitioners, leading to - improved quality child care for children and families; better working conditions for ECE's; and enriched field placement experiences for students. Reflective thinking does not automatically happen; it takes planning, training and practice in developing skills relating to reflective thinking. A supportive program that includes opportunities for reflective thinking improves and enhances child care practice.

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**Reflecting In Practice ~
La réflexion**

professionnelle is the theme of the 2011 Child Care Conference and Trade Show being held June 10 & 11 in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Special guest is Margie Carter, author and mentor. In addition to Margie's administrator PD day, keynote and workshop, there will be workshops focusing on reflective practice. Mark your calendars for another great conference!

Reflection Exercises:

Case Study: Building Blocks (Hawkins, 1997)

The teachers begin to sing the clean up song. Some of the children join in the singing, as they start to put their materials away. Terri, one of the teachers, sings, "Five more minutes before circle." The teachers circle the room encouraging the children to put their toys away.

Terri notices that Ben hasn't started to put his blocks on the shelf. She gently reminds him, "Ben, it's clean up time." Four-year-old Ben ignores her and continues to add blocks to his structure. Terri kneels down and repeats her instructions, "Ben, it's time for you to put your blocks away." He continues to build his building.

Terri: Ben, I want you to put the blocks on the shelf.

No response.

Terri: Ben, it's clean up time and I want you to start putting the blocks on the shelf (Terri begins to put the blocks on the shelf).

Ben: No, I don't want to put the blocks away. This is my house.

Terri (as she continues to put the blocks away): All the other children are putting their toys away and I will help you put the blocks away.

Ben knocks the building over with his hand.

Terri: I will help you put the blocks away (Terri continues to put the blocks on the shelf).

Ben hands the blocks to Terri, who puts them on the shelf.

Kim, another teacher, calls, "One more minute before circle."

Several of the children join Kim at the circle area.

Kim: Circle time, boys and girls. Come to circle. (Ben continues to stay in the block area.)

Terri asks Ben if he wants to go to circle with her. He takes her hand and goes to circle. As they sit down, Ben sits on Terri's lap. She puts her arms around him, as they begin to sing with the other children.

At the end of circle time, it is time for snack. As Kim calls each child's name, they are to go to the bathroom to wash their hands. She calls out Ben's name, but there is no response from him.

Kim: Ben, it's time to wash your hands. We're going to have snack next and you need clean hands.

(Ben says no by shaking his head and continues to sit on Terri's lap.)

- **Use the "Key Aspects of Reflecting on Teaching Practices" (p.2) to reflect on this case study.**

Standards of Practice Reflection Exercise:

The following Reflection Exercise uses a standard of practice developed for the Partners In Practice Mentoring Skills Development Series. Standards or Practice/Occupational Standards were developed by the Canadian Child Care Federation and recently revised by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. These can be used in a similar way.

PIP Standard of Practice:

Apply theories of child development to understanding children.

Early childhood educators use their knowledge of child development and their relationships with children and families to understand children as individuals and to plan in response to their unique needs and potentials.

Document your reflections on the following questions related to the standard of practice above. Use your reflections to dialogue with your colleague. What did you learn about your own practice?

Questions to Reflect Upon:

- How do early childhood educators learn to understand the individual needs of children?
- How do you know if you are supporting children's development?
- Where do you seek information about children's development when something arises that you have not dealt with before?
- How do you decide on ways to enhance the developmental needs of children in the program?
- What do you do when you experience ethical dilemmas about the child-rearing practices of parents and your knowledge of child development?

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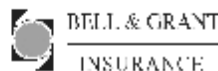
Editor: E. Elaine Ferguson
Child Care Connections
100-1200 Tower Road,
Halifax, NS B3H 4K6
(902) 423-8199
1-800-565-8199 (Atlantic)
(902) 492-8106 (fax)
cccns@istar.ca
www.cccns.org

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