



# Introduction

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Reflecting on practice underpins the work of an early years practitioner. This is quite a bold statement, considering a practitioner needs to provide opportunities for children to learn and make sense of the world. They have to do this by developing an enabling environment; work in partnership with parents, protect children, understand a raft of policy initiatives and plan to meet the demands of an early years curriculum. So why is reflection so important? In simple terms, it is because all of these initiatives, developments, policies and practices have to be thought about, tested, considered, and delivered in practice. In effect, without reflection on practice we are left with only a functional mechanism to improve knowledge, to consider new initiatives, define and refine practice and to respond to change. There is now a clear expectation for early years practitioners to carefully consider and reflect upon the way they engage with children and families. Indeed, it could be said that reflecting on practice is now an essential part of a practitioner's role in the 21st century. We say this not because of Government directives or because a Government agency thinks this will enhance the practice of the workforce. We say it because this is what practitioners are showing they are more than capable of doing. It is our contention that practitioners have active and lively minds, and not solely technocrats who gain skills and competencies. They have a basic disposition to make sense of experience, investigate it, care about others, relate to children and adapt to their physical and cultural environment. What is more, they can engage with others, compare, contrast and deepen their understanding if encouraged to do so.

As for whether commentators can universally agree upon ways to define and encourage 'reflection' is another matter. There has appeared over the last few years a range of opinions and research evidence that

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underlines the importance of reflection. These have encompassed not only the field of education, but law, music, theatre and the medical profession. Much of the evidence surrounding the origins and ongoing debates about the nature of professional reflection is contained in this book. However, a few examples may be useful. Moon (2008) sees reflection as a set of abilities and skills and developing ways to take a critical stance. Brookfield (1995) suggests that learners are reflecting when they offer analysis about personal experiences. Schön (1983) speaks of reflective practitioners who are thoughtful and contemplative and use intuition, insight and artistry. Perhaps this tells us about the need to see reflection as an emotional response that complements our knowledge and what we understand about a subject. It enables us to consider how we act and might act in a situation. In essence, reflection can be described as a means of helping those most closely involved to think about what they already know and consider ways they might want to improve or refine a situation. This may involve gaining more insight or knowledge about what goes on, which may well determine other ways to refine and develop their actions or relationships with others. Reflection is also important in a time of change. It allows us to consider ourselves and the changing world, to explore options and come to terms with new ideas and changing roles, responsibilities and relationships. Reflection provides us with a framework in order to manage our perceptions of the world around us. This is particularly important today when one of the few certainties within the early years sector is that change is occurring and is certain to occur in the future.

Different chapters of the book describe the way practitioners are responding to change and reflecting on practice. The practitioners represented in the chapters come from a range of different backgrounds, and from all over the UK. Their experiences are explored through the contexts of training, managing childcare settings, delivering the curriculum, experiencing the impact of policy decisions and working collaboratively. The book is organised into four sections which are loosely based on the four principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage, but which also reflect key issues for early years practitioners. Each chapter contributes a different perspective to the overall theme of the section, for example, in Section 1, 'Children's Learning and Development', you will encounter not only practical ways in which practitioners support children's learning and development, but why reflective practice is essential to developing professionalism. We explore the nature of reflection and the ways that reflection on practice can enhance self-awareness and contribute to professional development. Key themes of this section include understanding different

ways of working to explore how practitioners work with and interpret key legislative developments. More importantly, this section considers why it is important to be reflective and the subsequent impact this has on children in our care. The second section, 'The Unique Child', builds on these themes and addresses two significant areas of early years practice, understanding how we work towards providing opportunities for healthy children and ways in which we work to safeguard them. These chapters focus on the implications for the child at the centre of the process. They consider different perspectives of practitioners and how reflective thinking can support children's individual needs. We then move on to consider how reflective practice supports 'Enabling Professional Environments'. This section looks at the way in which early years professionals come together to support the development of children, families and communities. The chapters here emphasise the changing nature of early years practice, the way in which it is organised and the move towards multi-agency working and sharing professional expertise. Nevertheless, positive environments are unable to be facilitated without building on positive professional relationships, and Section 4, 'Positive Relationships in a Multi-agency World' provides examples of different ways in which practitioners are working towards developing these. Different perspectives are considered in how we develop, support and maintain communities of practice, and this final section looks at the different ways early years professionals are undertaking this challenge and how they have developed critical reflection skills on their personal learning journey.

Being reflective helps us to consider what motivates practitioners to understand their individual and collective roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Importantly, how these can be adapted and even change. We can do this by listening to the views of others, understand what has motivated them to change and in the process probably recognise some of ourselves as well. When their voices emanate from a realistic context that we recognise and understand, then reflection is not only useful but an essential component of working in the early years. We hope in the book we have provided some of those voices and that they will help you to consider your response to change. This you will find is a recurring theme as you move through the book and each chapter considers a different early years context. Some may be of more immediate interest than others and we are not suggesting that you start from the first page and work carefully to the end. You may care to start with the most familiar, but try to move forwards and tackle chapters that will expand your ideas and knowledge. All of the authors, have a realistic and positive view of early years education,

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they offer differing perspectives and within these sometimes similar interpretations. For example, the chapters on student learning tell us that students who are engaged in distance learning share some of the same apprehensions and capabilities as those following a more traditional academic route. In the same way, all the chapters reinforce the view that reflection on practice is important even though they each consider varied professional practice. As to whether the chapters represent best practice, provide a reasoned debate or just makes you think about your own practice is open to personal interpretation. There is no obligation to agree with the views expressed or to see the ideas about practice as something you must have in place. To do that would be presumptuous and undermine the whole idea of reflecting on practice. Therefore, use each of the chapters to inform your knowledge about differing aspects of early years education. It is important for you to engage in reflection as you meet parts of each chapter that ask you to reflect and use the list of references to delve into reports and find out the views of other commentators.

Finally, you may be an undergraduate student, a practitioner engaged in further study, perhaps aspiring to Early Years Professional Status. You might also (and just as importantly) be a motivated and capable practitioner who thinks that reflecting on practice actually benefits you and ultimately the children in your care. Whichever of these 'new professionals' you represent, do try and read the chapters with an open mind, and most importantly, discuss the content with other students, practitioners, and tutors. In this way we will have made a start in promoting reflection on practice.

### Introduction – Reed and Canning references

- Brookfield, S. (1995) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moon, J. (2008) *Critical Thinking: An Exploration of theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. How Professionals Think in Action. New York: Basic Books.