

“So What Do You Write in a Reflection?”

Exploring the Process Behind the Name

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Abstract: Reflection is part of the strategies most teachers use as they consider their practice with children. Essentially, it is a way of engaging with events and reframing them in order to consider what happened, associated thinking, personal and professional responses, relevant literature, and possibilities for practice in similar circumstances in the future. This paper suggests that the process of reflection includes many different forms of thinking, and identifying and exploring each one may better support the process of teaching ‘reflection’ to student teachers and make the process easier for professionals. Understanding each separate element may make clearer for educators each part of what they experience in their work with children, and any subsequent reconsideration of what happened.

Key Words: reflection

Introduction

Over the past decades, the concept and use of reflective practice for teachers has grown very quickly (Clandinin, Davies, Hogan, & Kennard, 1993). It has become commonplace for teachers to consider “their pre-suppositions, choices, experiences, and actions” in their practice with children (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 695). Such “mulling over” of everyday practice (Dewey & Boydston, 1976) often happens in quiet, informal moments. It is caused by events, both internal and external to the reviewer, that puzzle or challenge what they know or believe to be so. As Dewey and Boydson (1976) suggests, it involves “running over various ideas, sorting them out, comparing one with another, trying to get one which will write in itself the strength of two, searching for new points of view, developing new suggestions, guessing, suggesting, selecting and reflecting” (p. 160).

In this way, daily events are considered or puzzled over to make sense of the phenomena on their own and within the parameters of personal practice.

Definitions

Reflective practice and *reflection* are familiar terms to early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. Hickson (2011) suggests that, “A reflection can be many things. We can see a reflection in a mirror or in a puddle of water, and we can think about an experience and ponder what happened and why” (p. 829).

Schön (1983) described the process of reflection as when teachers ...

... think back on the project they have undertaken, a situation they have lived through, and explore the understandings they have brought to their handling of the case. They may do this in a mood of idle speculation, or in a deliberate effort to prepare themselves for future cases (p. 61).

Reflection can be defined as both a *process* and a *product*. As a product, it comes at the end of bringing particular ways of thinking to bear in considering personal practice. This might

include some form of change in practice, alteration in how we think about what we do with children, or simply better understanding of ourselves as teachers.

Reflection can also be defined as a process. Haigh (2000) suggests that reflection is a process, “ a distinctive form of thinking defined by particular purposes, foci, timing and skills” (p. 87). This process of reflection can be either informal, taking only a brief moment, or an in-depth consideration of what happened. Schön has described this process in two ways, first as occurring in the moment-to-moment interactions with children (*reflection-in-action*), and second, occurring after the event when the events of the day are recalled and reconsidered (*reflection-on-action*). Eraut (1995), however, has suggested that in the case of reflection-in-action, there is neither enough time in practice for this type of reflection nor little evidence of it in the research.

Some practitioners record events in practice in a reflective journal simply as a means of keeping a record of this process. In writing down thinking, connections to previous events can be made and values and beliefs that may subconsciously be affecting practice may become evident. As Holly (1983) observes, the journal is “a reconstruction of experience ... Like the diary, the journal is a place to ‘let it all out’ ... the journal is also a place for making sense of what *is* out ... the journal is a working document” (p. 20).

All of this is recorded for further reading and in-depth consideration. This latter part of the process is of particular importance because why we practise in the way we do becomes subconscious or tacit over time, as we “take it for granted”. Because of this, we may not be aware of elements that affect our practice. Examples of these elements could be attitudes, assumptions, values and/or beliefs that will continue to influence what we do with children and families, until we bring them to the surface. Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002) suggested that “writing it down” helped facilitate thinking through issues and problems students faced as their teaching skills developed” (p. 42).

Elements of the Process and Issues with Describing the Process

The process of reflection seems to include several different elements. These include noticing, recognition/lack of recognition, observing, initial interpretation, internal self-questioning, emotion, introspection, retrospection, autobiographical memory, and reframing of the issue; the following sections describe these elements. However, in clearly describing the process of reflection, it must be noted that these elements may not occur in the order given, may not occur in every reflection, may take only seconds to commence and conclude, and may occur at the same time as each other, not sequentially. Furthermore, not every event or experience demands practitioners’ reflections.

Noticing/observing.

The first stage in developing a reflection is describing what happened. When an event occurs in the immediate environment it might initially be noticed. If it is immediately recognisable, no further conscious thinking is required and the viewer simply moves on. However, if something is either partly or totally unrecognised, further thinking is required to make sense of the event and this leads to further in-depth, conscious viewing of it. This is because humans think further about what is unusual or puzzles them, or what is personally important to understand; they “leave out” what is not (Hansen & Perry, 2012). Therefore, in developing a reflection, systematic description is important in order to capture as much detail as possible. This is because details can trigger further recollection and possible answers later on.

Initial interpretation.

As events occur and are revisited and described by the viewer, initial interpretations occur as the viewer looks at what happened from different perspectives in a quest for understanding (Moran and Tegano, 2005). This early interpretation may also include myriad questions and tentative answers about the events and, in this respect, it records “where I made a move ahead in my thinking, where I struggled with a difficult problem, where I documented/evaluated some aspect of field work” (Borg, 2001, p. 159). Possibilities or “hunches” designed to improve understanding of practice in similar situations and that could be tested or tried out in the future are often noted at this point.

Introspection (looking inward).

A third type of writing that might appear in reflection or a reflective journal is introspection, or “looking inward”. Feest (2012) writes that “to study conscious experience we have to use introspection” (p. 1). This is “a mental operation that allows one to ‘introspect’ one’s current mental state” (Overgaard, Gallagher, & Ramsøy, 2008, p. 10). This process has moved in and out of favour during the twentieth century, with issues centring on the lack of external validation, the unconscious impact of beliefs and motives (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) and the heavy reliance on the author’s memory which can be subject to lapses (Rodd, 2011). Hatfield (2005) and Hayano (1979) suggest also that it is not possible to control introspection and doubt whether it can be generalised, particularly from a sample size of one. Even though these have been raised as viable issues in using introspection, it must be questioned how else can one look at the influences and underpinnings of practice, especially one’s own practice, without looking inward?

Emotions and feelings also form a strong part of the process of reflection and in reflective journals. Human responses to events are often clouded by emotions and yet emotions may not always be acknowledged or the accompanying effects explored. Moon (2004) describes emotion in the reflective process, discussing those emotions that are triggered by the events and those that are brought to bear on interpretations of the events. Each is important in the process of considering practice.

Retrospection and autobiographical memory.

A fourth type of thinking in the process of considering practice is retrospection and the associated autobiographical memory. Retrospection means looking backwards and at events in personal experience and memory that were either seen by the viewer or that affected them directly. This process is when the brain goes into “retrieval mode” in response to a stimulus (Conway & Pleydell-Pierce, 2000, p. 261). The process of synthesis of the knowledge gained from all of our different life experiences leads us to create our own life history or “autobiographical memory” from childhood. At the same time, however, it is also important to bear in mind that previous memories are reconstructed thoughts that may change with the influence of new events and/or time passing. This creates issues in terms of perspective because the accuracy of such reconstruction and synthesis of scraps of memory can and has been called into question.

In the literature, clear distinctions are made between different and very specific forms of memories in the retrospection process: Fivush (2011, p. 560) describes “episodic” memory or individual events in the past, whilst Tulving (2002) discusses retrospection “where the subject remembers themselves as experiencing a particular event”. Conway and Pleydell-Pierce (2000) describe retrospection as being “of fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood, that is, for the experience of enduring as an individual, in a culture, over time” (p. 261).

Internal self-questioning and discussion.

A fifth type of thinking involves internal conversations with one's self about what happened (Archer, 2003). In these internal dialogues, questions emerge and recollection of other similar events can be used to help make sense of what was happening. As Moon (2004) suggests, "Knowing is a constructive process, a form of fiction that is generated on the basis of a selection of prior experiences" (p. 15). This element in the reflective process is one of mulling over future responses, considering the importance and place of what has happened, and constructing new ways of "seeing" similar events. These new sets of perspective are then open to testing for relevance when similar events occur.

Uncovering and exploring these elements for this paper is only the first step in unpacking the process for ease of use, particularly by student teachers. There may be other elements that will emerge in future research. To facilitate the process of reflection, the following table suggests a framework of questions that may lead practitioners through the elements of understanding particular events or experiences in practice.

Figure 1. Questions that Enable the Process of Reflection in each Individual Element

Element of the process	Questions
Noticing/observing	What did I experience? What happened?
Initial interpretation	What was I thinking about as these events were happening? What do I think this event meant? What do I need to know immediately to understand this?
Introspection (looking inward)	Why did I think about this as I did? How did this make me feel? Why did I feel as I did?
Retrospection and autobiographical memory	What did I remember when experiencing this event? Why did this come back to me? What is the connection?
Internal self-questioning and discussion	What do I need to know to make sense of this for the future? Will my plans work in my practice?

Conclusion

This paper may be considered to be tilting at a holy grail of teaching, as it suggests that perhaps this extremely important part of early childhood pedagogy needs revisiting and re-interpreting, at least for student teachers. It may be suggested that there are a range of models that are used already that offer practitioners alternative ways of approaching this topic. However, sometimes these do not match the ways of thinking of the practitioner because they divide up thinking in ways that are difficult to isolate and thus to follow. This paper suggests that a process made up of elements of thinking that give ideas to practitioners about what to write, may be more useful than having a defined reflective method because allowing choice in which components are used, in what order and for what reasons gives adaptability to the user and to the end product. The process of considering events and experiences in practice that is outlined here will need further investigation in terms of its validity and usefulness for practitioners. These investigations may lead to the notion that the term reflection itself is problematic, and the myriad forms of thinking that are hidden within this term may be more useful if they were shown as what they are.

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