

46. Noble, K., Macfarlane, K. & Cartmel, J. (2004) Using critical reflection to prepare practitioners for pedagogical work with infants and toddlers. Symposium paper at the Australian Association of Research in Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia, November-December.

## **Using critical reflection to prepare practitioners for pedagogical work with infants and toddlers**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines an early childhood care and education practitioner preparation program set in the School of Human Services at Griffith University in Queensland. Within this program traditional methods of teaching reflective practice have been employed in an effort to develop this skill in prospective graduates. The authors critique this traditional process arguing that it limits the ability of practitioners to effectively engage in the reflective process as it tends to be based on isolated experiences that do not create space for a dialogic relationship. Moreover, it is argued that there is an urgency with respect to the development of critically reflective practitioners to work with young children, particularly infants and toddlers, in light of recent policy changes. Strategies are developed to move prospective practitioners from practice/ self-reflection to critical reflection. Implications for practitioner educators are discussed.

### **Introduction**

Scholarship in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has often been underpinned by a focus on reflective practice as a means of evaluating and assessing appropriate practice for work with young children (Moss, 2000; Moss & Pence, 1994; National Child Care Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2002; Noble, 2003; Perry, 1997). As such, the ability to reflect on practice has traditionally been a way for practitioners to evaluate their own practice and the practice of others, with a view to developing effective programs for young children (Fleer, 2000; Goodfellow, 1995; MacNaughton & Williams, 1998; NCAC, 2002; Patterson & Sumsion, 1996; Perry, 1997; Sumsion, 2003). Various methods of reflective practice are employed within the field from basic diary writing to the adoption of particular models, as a means of providing a framework for the reflective process, so that it can inform the work of the practitioners participating within it. (Brookfield, 1995; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Schon, 1991; Sumsion, 2003; Zeichner & Lidston, 1987). In fact, it can be argued that

the 'good' early childhood teacher is one who undertakes reflective practice as a means of engaging in *excellent* teaching (MacNaughton & Williams, 1998)

In response to such beliefs, reflective practice is viewed as an important component of early childhood education and care practitioner preparation programs (Fleer, 2000; Sumsion, 2003). This is certainly the case in the Bachelor of Human Services (Child and Family Studies) degree program at Griffith University in Queensland. The academic staff involved in this program, prepare practitioners to use reflective practice, as a means of evaluating their own practice and the practice of others in the ECEC sector. This occurs in response to the belief that reflection on practice is a means of promoting improvement in practice, maintaining professionalism and professional development, when these graduates move into the field.

### **Reflective practice in action**

For the purpose of this paper, reflective practice is a "core activity" (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.145), understood as the ability to evaluate critical incidents within daily work, using this evaluation as a means of improving practice and knowledge about work with young children. The reflective practitioner is one who provides space for "new possibilities to be explored and realised" (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.145). This practitioner engages in this space to construct, rather than reproduce, knowledge. To reflect effectively, practitioners must not see themselves as the "repository of objects of knowledge" (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.145), but rather, must engage in a process that allows them to construct new epistemological understandings that are informed by theory, research and practice. Such a process enables practitioners to examine possibilities so that they are unconstrained by their own beliefs and value systems, and by grand narratives that exist as a part of their subjectivity.

In the Child and Family Studies program at Griffith University, reflective practice takes place as part of the practicum embedded in the courses 2023HSV Care and Education: Infant and Toddler, 2025HSV Care and Education 2-5 years, and 3013HSV Care and Education 6-12years. Students in this particular program are required to undertake debriefing processes as part of their practicum experience. These debriefing sessions are usually held either during the practicum process or at

the end of the experience. These sessions are considered to be an important part of the practicum process, in that they allow students to engage in a dialogic relationship with other students and academics, which works to inform and develop their future practice. This process assists students to develop skills, knowledge and abilities that are characteristic of reflective practitioners.

Additionally, students in the Child and Family Studies program are required to keep a reflective journal as a part of their practicum portfolios. These reflective journals move from simple diary reflections to a more complex model based on the work of Schon (1991) and underpinned by theory and research. This particular progression is undertaken in order to maximise opportunities for the students to develop reflective abilities, to link understandings gained to theory and research and use such understandings as a means to inform their practice. Moreover, such a progression is necessary so that students are given numerous opportunities to practice linking theory and research to their daily work with young children. Thus, this progression creates space for students to explore the multiplicity of reactions that are possible to any critical incidents that occur in their daily work.

### **Evaluating traditional methods**

The progression through the reflective process described above could be considered to be an example of traditional practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Corrie & Maloney, 2000; Hutchins & Sims, 1999; Perry, 1997; Zeichner & Lidston, 1987). While there would be numerous ways to undertake to teach the reflective process to practitioners in preparation programs, the above-mentioned methods would be used in some form in a significant number of programs. Regardless of the way in which institutions implement the teaching of reflective practice, the above-mentioned strategies have become a traditional part of the strategies implemented for teaching reflective practice at many high quality early childhood education and care practitioner preparation institutions ([www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au](http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au); [www.iml.uts.edu.au](http://www.iml.uts.edu.au); <http://online.mq.edu.au>).

While this may be the case, it remains questionable as to whether the processes of debriefing and journal writing actually do work effectively to prepare practitioners to

become reflective. Evidence suggests that professional development and changes in practice are more likely to occur when processes are active rather than passive (Ministry of Education, 2003). Thus, participation in debriefing and in journal writing must be undertaken in particular ways to ensure that these processes contribute to professional development and practice changes.

To be active, debriefing processes must engage all participants. As such, this debriefing process must take place as small group discussion (Ministry of Education, 2003) that works through critical incidents informed by participants at various levels of professionalism. To engage in small group discussion where each member is at a similar level of professional development may indeed prove fruitless, in that only a narrow knowledge base is being drawn upon. Thus, participation of members of various levels of experience may actually be more useful in providing an examination of the multiplicity of responses to any given situation.

In a similar way, journal writing must be an active process. While journal writing suggests activity by its very process, a particular type of engagement is necessary for the process to be effective. Students must be taught to draw links between theory, research and practice in order for this process to be beneficial. In this way, journal writing is more active because students are required to seek out justification for their actions and responses rather than merely describing them and engaging in trial and error. As such, this reflective journal process acts as a means of triangulation to support decisions made about practice change and implementation.

In the Child and Family Studies program, the academic staff have engaged in the process of reflection on the way in which the reflective process is taught to the students. By taking the above issues into account, the staff in this program have theorised that direct benefit in the form of the development of reflective skills in the students is not ensured. Consequently, these academics have set out to provide a program that goes further towards ensuring that these skills are developed.

### **Critical reflection versus reflective practice**

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It can be ascertained that there is a difference between reflective practice and critical reflection, and that this difference exists in the ability of the practitioner to engage with multiple understandings of practice. The process of reflective practice promotes a culture of evaluation, whereby all practitioners become involved in processes that assist them to constantly review what is happening and what should be happening within a community of practice. According to Wadsworth (1997) such reflection can be built into the everyday activities of practitioners through a variety of means including daily informal self reflection as well as through more formalised processes as described in the previous section of this paper.

In comparison, critical reflection is understood to be the ability to reflect honestly on one's practice in a manner that allows multiple perspectives and approaches to inform the work that is done. Critical reflection differs from reflective practice that, for early childhood practitioners, has often been informed by romantic notions of idealistic approaches to working with young children (Sumsion, 2003). These romantic notions of practice do not withstand the complexity, uncertainty and insecurity of working with young children and their families in the current context (Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Jenks, 1996a, 1996b; Lyotard, 1984). Thus, critical reflection needs to address this dilemma, allowing multiple perspectives and understandings to be examined and employed by practitioners in the field. Sumsion (2003) understands critical reflection as a discursive project using Phelan's argument, which contests that preservice teachers and practitioners should "be exposed to a wider range of discourses than are traditionally sanctioned by teacher education programs" (Sumsion, 2003, p.83). Furthermore, Phelan states

... [practitioner] education needs to become a discursive project. There is no escaping discourse. There is no escaping that language/discourse constitutes experience generally, and our experience of place specifically. [Practitioner] educators may need to consider how we can help prospective practitioners to recognize the multiple discourses that shape and often restrict their thinking about experience and place (cited in Sumsion, 2003, p.19).

Thus, if critical reflection can be effectively taught to preservice practitioners, it can act as a means of deconstructing traditional grand narratives and approaches that may delimit possibilities for well informed and responsive practice. In order to achieve

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this level of critical reflective ability, undergraduate early childhood practitioners need to be provided opportunities to develop the necessary skills for high quality practice including the skills of critical reflection.

An examination of the processes involved in the teaching reflective practice to practitioners in the Bachelor of Human Services (Child and Family Studies) program, indicates that this critical reflection is not necessarily taking place. Whilst effective traditional methods have been employed it is clear that these do not necessarily ensure the development of this ability, as they are relying largely on peer group reflection guided by only minimal input from more experienced practitioners. As such, to ensure that critical reflection becomes possible, space must be created for these prospective practitioners to engage with and practice these skills in the company of experienced practitioners from the field as well as from academe. Such a process will also work to inform the compilation of a reflective journal, allowing space for the examination of critical incidents evaluated by experienced practitioners as well as information from theory and other literature.

### **The Learning Circle approach**

Evidence gained from substantial critical reflection and research has encouraged the academics in the Child and Family Studies program, to develop an alternative model for teaching the skills of critical reflection to prospective practitioners. This model is based on the Learning Circle approach that has been chosen here in order to maximise opportunities for students to critically reflect upon the practicum experience, thereby further enhancing the learning outcomes achieved through practicum and the development of the generic skills necessary to work across many different programs. Learning Circles provide self-directed learning with the learning occurring through shared inquiry and dialogue (Karasi & Segar, 2000). The decision to use Learning Circles was based on the need to have effective debriefing processes and time for high quality critical reflection, particularly with an increasing number of students participating in the program.

The adoption of this approach, along with a reconceptualised practicum experience, has been used in the first semester of 2004 for students in the course *2023HSV Care*

the end of the experience. These sessions are considered to be an important part of the practicum process, in that they allow students to engage in a dialogic relationship with other students and academics, which works to inform and develop their future practice. This process assists students to develop skills, knowledge and abilities that are characteristic of reflective practitioners.

Additionally, students in the Child and Family Studies program are required to keep a reflective journal as a part of their practicum portfolios. These reflective journals move from simple diary reflections to a more complex model based on the work of Schon (1991) and underpinned by theory and research. This particular progression is undertaken in order to maximise opportunities for the students to develop reflective abilities, to link understandings gained to theory and research and use such understandings as a means to inform their practice. Moreover, such a progression is necessary so that students are given numerous opportunities to practice linking theory and research to their daily work with young children. Thus, this progression creates space for students to explore the multiplicity of reactions that are possible to any critical incidents that occur in their daily work.

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While this may be the case, it remains questionable as to whether the processes of debriefing and journal writing actually do work effectively to prepare practitioners to

*and Education Infant and Toddler*. Participation in this reconceptualised experience by academics, child care centre staff and students has provided an opportunity to examine how such an approach compares to previous traditional methods in developing the skills of critical reflection in students. Such an evaluation will be undertaken and reported on in depth in subsequent papers that explore the Learning Circle approach more fully and report on student, staff and practitioner evaluations of the process.

## **Conclusion**

This introductory paper has explored traditional notions of reflective practice in relation to what it means to reflect critically on work with young children. An examination of such notions as implemented in the Bachelor of Human Services (Child and Family Studies) program has been undertaken. It has been argued that traditional notions are often delimited by the ECEC practitioner's subjectivity, particularly in relation to romantic notions of ideal settings for young children. The Learning Circle approach has been suggested as an alternative method of teaching critical reflection to prospective practitioners in the ECEC field. An exploration of the effectiveness of such an approach along with the reconceptualised practicum experience will be reported on in subsequent papers.

It can be ascertained that there is a difference between reflective practice and critical reflection, and that this difference exists in the ability of the practitioner to engage with multiple understandings of practice. The process of reflective practice promotes a culture of evaluation, whereby all practitioners become involved in processes that assist them to constantly review what is happening and what should be happening within a community of practice. According to Wadsworth (1997) such reflection can be built into the everyday activities of practitioners through a variety of means including daily informal self reflection as well as through more formalised processes as described in the previous section of this paper.

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