Reflection as a tool for quality: Working with the National Quality Standard

A Research in Practice Series title

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Early Childhood Australia actively promotes the provision of high-quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. Early Childhood Australia is also the national umbrella organisation for children’s services and a leading early childhood publisher.

About the series

The Research in Practice Series is published four times each year by Early Childhood Australia.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide-ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children’s services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children.

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About the author

The authors are members of the Child and Family Studies team in the School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University. They are in demand as leaders of facilitation and learning about critical reflection. As well as including critical reflection as a major focus within their university teaching program and field education experiences, they also deliver and research about reflective practice in professional learning sessions within children’s services such as integrated early childhood settings, long day care, school age care, child protection and health services. The team was presented with a national university teaching award for contribution to student learning based on their approaches to using and teaching critical reflection. Their approaches prepare educators to provide quality services in a rapidly changing social and systemic environment. The strategies have developed a process that captures the best of critically-reflective practice and collaborative learning and is a model for life-long learning.

Dr Jennifer Cartmel has a broad track record in teaching, research and practice with children and families, particularly in early childhood education and care and school age care services. She has extensive knowledge of the national quality reform agenda and the early childhood reforms, and networks with practitioners, researchers and policy makers in Australia and internationally.

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Introduction

This booklet is intended to assist educators to understand the process of critical reflection and its usefulness for facilitating quality practices in early years settings. The processes highlighted in this document have been aligned to those required in the National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care and the associated Quality Improvement Plan. This resource will help educators by providing a description of reflective practice accompanied by examples that can be used in the day-to-day work of early years educators. The resource contains information about three important steps that are essential in developing the skills of critical reflection:

◆ Self-awareness
◆ Building relationships
◆ Developing knowledge.

It will be particularly helpful to lead educators working with staff teams to engage in reflective practice sessions. Within this publication there are some strategies to try to help early years educators engage in reflective practice. They include before and after questions (for self-awareness) and Circles of Change—Reflective conversation (for building relationships and developing knowledge).

Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice. Its intention is to gather information and gain insights that support, inform and enrich decision-making about children’s wellbeing and development. As professionals, educators examine what happens in their settings and reflect on what they might change. Critical reflection involves closely examining all aspects of events and experiences from different perspectives. Educators often frame their reflective practice within a set of overarching questions, developing more specific questions for particular areas of enquiry.

Excerpt from Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (p. 13) and My Time Our Place, Framework for School Age Care (p. 11).

‘Empower—to understand one’s own potential.’
What is reflection?

Reflective practice is seen as a ‘core’ task for educators in children’s services. It is the ability to examine the activities within daily work and to use this evaluation as a means of improving practice and knowledge. Educators are encouraged to think about what has happened in practice and how it could be different.

It is a thinking and discussion process with the individuals’ thinking going ‘to and fro’ as early childhood principles and practices are considered from multiple perspectives. An example of this process in everyday practice is when an educator, Meg, needs to get some equipment for the six children playing in the sand pit. Initially she selects six buckets and spades, then she changes her mind as she thinks about how she is trying to assist the children to take turns, cooperating with each other using simple sentences to negotiate. She decides to only take three buckets, three spades and three dump trucks and tells her colleagues about her decision to encourage the children to negotiate with each other and share the equipment. In brief, her thinking takes into account how the children might perceive the situation, how other staff might see the situation and the learning outcomes she has for children. At the end of the session she reflects further about her actions and considers whether her intentions to encourage the children to communicate and cooperate were achieved and how her practice impacted on the holistic development, learning and wellbeing of the children and her partnership with parents.

Creating new and shared understanding about care and education principles and practices is important to work towards achieving quality practice (like Meg’s decision about sandpit equipment). It is more than a shift in practice as it also requires a shift of the mind, will and heart (Scharmer, 2009). This means that educators are using all their senses including watching, listening, feeling and thinking. Further, they are open-minded when they are thinking about what they do. There are many opportunities throughout the day or week in which educators can become involved in critical reflection about quality practices within their settings. It could be about daily group time routines or it may be about the policy for orienting families to the service. It is hoped that the benefits of working toward quality practice provision will lead to the development of new practices that will be more responsive, less fragmented and help to solve the challenges that children and families face.
What is critical reflection?

Reflective practice has been identified as an effective tool for encouraging the professional learning of educators. There are several types of reflection:

a. descriptive reflection—recounting what has happened, just listing the facts. For example, today at lunch Max ate his cheese sandwiches after eating his tub of yoghurt.

b. critical reflection—the deepest type of reflection and the one that really helps the professional learning of educators and subsequently improves practice in long day care, family day care and school age care. For example, today at lunch I was concerned that Max was very sleepy and would not eat his lunch of cheese sandwiches and yoghurt. It was a hot day and Max had arrived at the centre early, dropped by his grandparents. I was not sure if he was over-tired or the food was not his usual fare. I also discussed the rigidity of our lunch routines for the youngest children with other staff as we thought about what we would do the following day to ensure Max was able to eat his lunch.

As the reflective thinking process goes ‘to and fro’, creating new ideas and new perspectives about quality practices, the thinking process draws on everyday experiences and understanding, and also contemporary early childhood theory and research to assist educators to think otherwise about practice.
How is critical reflection linked to a Quality Improvement Plan?

Reflective practice is considered to be an essential technique for promoting improvement and is a feature of the National Quality Framework (NQF) which requires educators to consider improving practices in areas that impact on a child’s development, wellbeing and safety and to provide families with quality information to help them make informed choices about services (DEEWR, 2011).

The Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) is part of the NQF for Early Childhood Education and Care. This framework guides educators to provide a higher standard of care for children in the critical areas of education, health and safety and will provide clearer and comprehensive information for families so they can choose the best services for their child (DEEWR, 2011).

The NQF includes a National Quality Standard which has seven areas that educators need to consider when they are providing high-quality services to children and families. These areas have been identified by research and are:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children’s health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships with children
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Leadership and service management.
Educators will use the QIP to discuss and improve the quality of the practices occurring in their settings. In order to develop the QIP, educators will utilise their skills of reflective practice.

In this next section we are going to discuss three elements of the critical reflection process. The combination of these three elements are integral:

1. Self-awareness
2. Building relationships
3. Building knowledge.

1. Self-awareness

The first step in becoming more effective in critical reflection is to be self-aware. This requires educators to be conscious of why they do what they do. In other words they need to be aware of their own beliefs and values about their actions or pedagogy in the light of their understanding of theory and research if they are going to engage in quality practice. For educators, the ability to assess and justify the quality of practices within their settings is important to perpetuating the unique qualities of early childhood principles and practices. The reflective process is made easier if there are some questions to support the thinking process.

These before and after questions will allow you to ‘have a go’ at critical reflection in different ways so that it becomes

‘For educators, the ability to assess and justify the quality of practices within their settings is important ...’
The Early Years Learning Framework: Essential reading for the National Quality Standard

This edition of the Research in Practice Series will help guide educators to link the philosophies of the Early Years Learning Framework to the requirements of the recently released National Quality Standard. The new national standards require educators to show evidence of their practice and philosophies, and has been developed based on the core ideas of the EYLF (Belonging, Being and Becoming). As such, the EYLF is an excellent way to approach the new NQS.

Authors: Various. 28 pages.
Price: $15.95  ECA code: RIP1202

‘Stories from the Heart’: Connecting children and families with our Earth

Located in Oyster Bay, Sydney, The Point Preschool has always had a rich history of being sustainable and has strong partnerships with the local council and neighbours who have made it possible to build a strong sense of community. Over the past 11 years, The Point Preschool’s policies, practices, building and surrounding environment have been transformed and enriched thanks to the children’s passion, families’ support, the educators’ dedication and partnerships with the local Indigenous people, community and council.

Author: Catherine Lee. 28 pages.
Price: $15.95  ECA code: RIP1203

Every Child - Vol.18 No.2

With this issue of Every Child we’re well into the National Quality reforms and getting our heads around what this means in practice now and in the future. The sentiments around the need for reforms are positive. This issue of Every Child spotlights educational planning and programming in the light of the reform agenda. Each of our writers focuses on dimensions of planning that contribute to successful pedagogies—especially those aspects that involve curriculum decision making, teaching and learning.

Authors: Various. 44 pages
Price: $17.95  ECA code: EC1202

Every Child - Vol.18 No.3

In this issue of Every Child we include some articles based on papers presented at the conference. There are some from new writers, such as pre-service teacher Rebecca Trimble-Roles, who writes about the importance of play. Andrew Reimer’s article provides some very insightful ideas about building staff resilience in challenging times. Margaret Sims’ and Margaret Young’s articles highlight the longstanding quest to see early childhood educators become more professionalised.

Authors: Various. 40 pages
Price: $17.95  ECA code: EC1203

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The processes highlighted in this document have been aligned to those required in the National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care and the associated Quality Improvement Plan.

Chapters covered in this book include:

- what is reflection?
- what is critical reflection and how is it linked to the Quality Improvement Plan?
- before and after questions to help self-awareness
- conversations to build relationships
- a case study—Circles of Change.

Reflection as a tool for quality: Working with the National Quality Standard will be particularly helpful to lead educators working with staff teams to engage in reflective practice sessions. The strategies outlined will help early years educators to engage in reflective practice, develop their skills and build effective relationships.