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Can reflective practice guide me in making better decisions for my early childhood classroom?

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“Educator as critically reflective practitioner” is printed on a sign in the School of Education on the campus at Virginia Commonwealth University. What does this mean if you are a teacher in an early childhood classroom and what would it look like? In an age of increased technological advances and instant answers to our questions, why does reflection matter? This article will take a look at the journey to be more reflective.



Reflecting on our teaching strategies can inform our practice.

Somewhere along the professional path as an early childhood teacher, some of us may have lost sight of the importance of self-reflection. Young children look to us each day to provide stimulating, engaging and meaningful classrooms but how do we know we are on the right track? One answer may be to take a close look at our own teaching practices, the learning environment and the interactions we have on a daily basis in the early childhood classroom.

What is reflective practice?

In their book, *Learning together with young children: A curriculum framework for reflective teachers* (2008), Curtis and Carter begin with a quote from Shonya Shoptaugh, “To enter into a style of teaching which is based on questioning what we’re doing and why, on listening to children, on thinking about how theory is translated into practice and how practice informs theory, is to enter into a way of working where professional development takes place day after day in the classroom” (p.9). Reflective practice is an ongoing process of looking and observing, recording one’s own teaching practices and taking action to make positive changes in the classroom for young children. It has been shown to foster continuous professional development for teachers and

result in positive benefits for children (Katz, 2012).

Why is reflective practice important?

When we take a close look at what is going on in the classroom each day, we discover that an early childhood classroom is a complex place. Many factors guide the decisions we make each day – individual children’s interests, background experiences, learning differences and learning preferences, and the age and stage of children’s development (Katz, 2012).

Reflection allows teachers to take an in-depth look at their teaching practices and gives them the opportunity to consider how child development affects learning. Since we know children do not develop at the same rate, reflection allows us to meet the needs of each child. This can include adaptations for children and changes to our daily schedule and modifications for the classroom

environment. Our reflective practice can result in lesson plans built upon children's strengths and following interests.

Reflecting on what we have done on any given day in the classroom assists us to become aware of the different modalities and instructional learning formats we have used and helps us determine what was successful and what was not. Most importantly, reflection drives home the need to examine whether our classroom practices really reflect our philosophy about how children learn. We want children to be critical thinkers, so it is important that we are following teaching practices that allow us to also be critical thinkers when planning classroom experiences for the children.

How can teachers get started on becoming more reflective?

First, we must recognize our own values about teaching and personal beliefs about teaching. To become more reflective, we need to be open to changing our teaching practices by taking a critical look at ourselves and developing skills to become self-aware (Dodge, Colker and Heroman, 2002). The reflective process begins with taking a close objective look at how we see and define our role as a teacher in supporting a child's learning. Some possible reflection questions to ask ourselves each day include:

- How am I presenting new information to children in a large group setting?
- How am I implementing curriculum activities throughout the daily routine?
- How am I facilitating a child's role play during interest center choices?
- How often am I observing how children approach their own learning?
- What is my system for monitoring the progress of the children?
- How do I use the information from ongoing assessments to inform the scope and sequence of my teaching?

Secondly, teachers may struggle with the "how" of reflective practice. Finding time throughout the day to take anecdotal notes about the success of activities or the engagement level of the children can feel time consuming and tedious. Where do we start and how do we begin? Teachers must decide what will work for them. Classroom environments, daily schedules, teacher knowledge and skills experience will all vary – and so teachers will need to develop for themselves a way to capture the most meaningful, relevant and authentic information. Teachers may begin by focusing on a specific teacher-directed activity such as whole group time. For example, the teacher might focus her reflection for the day on reading a story to the children. She could reflect on the following questions at the end of the day: Did I use a motivating technique at the beginning of group time to get the children's attention? If the children remained engaged throughout the story, what might have contributed to their sustained engagement? If some children appeared disinterested, what could I have done differently? How else could I use this book to give the children repeated experiences with the content?

Finally, regardless of how teachers decide to reflect upon their practice the reflections should be more than a collection of thoughts and feelings of what occurred in a particular timeframe. A reflection is an account of what occurred, possible reasons why it occurred and what possible changes might be needed. This allows teachers to record the changes made based on their reflection and follow them over a period of time.

Reflections can include how we might be successful in helping children develop skills, what specific content to include and how to go about pacing the content (Curtis and Carter, 2008). Teachers often select a topic for reflection that includes an area that is challenging for them or they feel needs improvement. Reflections can inform teachers about many things, but the most important piece of any reflection will be how it might guide positive changes in the classroom. For example, if you are focusing on circle time and notice the engagement level of the children waning, you can look at several things that might affect that activity. After reflecting upon the lack of engagement, you consider the use of a visual prop, incorporating music and movement during circle time, allowing flexibility of movement, changing the physical location in the classroom of where the group time is held or the possibility of offering an alternate activity for children who have a shorter attention span. By reviewing our reflections on a regular basis, we can use them as a springboard for making changes to the classroom environment, selecting learning opportunities for the children and considering changes in our

own teaching strategies.

What can I learn from being reflective about my practice?

When we reflect on our teaching practices we can also ask ourselves questions that can be as broad as defining our role as a teacher in supporting children's learning or as specific as what picture book to read to introduce the concept of feelings. We might think about the content of the material we are presenting to young children and consider if the activity is developmentally appropriate. Early childhood teachers make decisions each day in the classroom when we teach. Sometimes we make decisions on the spur of the moment, out of habit or by instinct. Reflecting on what and how we teach assists us in becoming more thoughtful, intentional and effective in our classrooms each day with young children.

References

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