


VICTORIAN EARLY YEARS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

PRACTICE PRINCIPLE GUIDE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE





Practice Principles cultural knowledge story by Dr. Sue Lopez Atkinson (Yorta Yorta) and artwork by Annette Sax (Taungurung)

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is part of a series of eight guides to the Practice Principles in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

This guide aims to support early childhood professionals to engage in reflection in their work. The guide will support you to reflect alone or with a mentor, critical friend, with families, children and with other professionals. The guide can also be used as part of a regular cycle of meetings that support learning communities.

Reflective practice is integral to quality improvement. It is a continuous process that over time leads to better outcomes for every child and family. It takes time and effort to embed it in daily practice.

Reflective practice starts with taking time to think more carefully about what you do, how you do it and why you do it. Reading this guide and using it to support conversations with others will help you along the way.

The guide draws on the Evidence Paper for Practice Principle: Reflective Practice written for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development by the University of Melbourne. For detail about the evidence mentioned in this guide, and for more depth on this practice principle refer to the evidence paper found at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/edcare/Pages/profresource.aspx>

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES – CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE STORY

- Bunjil the Eagle and Waa the Crow represent Aboriginal culture and ***partnerships with families***.
- The water hole symbolises ***reflective practice***.
- The gum leaves with their different patterns and colours represent ***diversity***.
- The stones underneath the leaves represent ***equity***. They reflect the additional support put in place in order for all children to achieve.
- The child and adults standing on 'Ochre mountain' symbolise the ***high/equitable expectations*** we hold for children and adults.
- The family standing on and looking out from 'Ochre mountain' reflects ***assessment for learning and development***. Such assessments draw on children's and families' perspectives, knowledge, experiences and expectations.
- The child and adult figures also represent ***partnerships with professionals***.
- The land symbol as mother earth represents the basis for ***respectful relationships and responsive engagement***.
- The symbols for land, water and people signify ***holistic and integrated*** approaches based on connections to Clan and Country.

(Dr. Sue Lopez-Atkinson, Yorta Yorta)



WHAT IS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?

Reflective practice is an ongoing, dynamic process of thinking honestly, deeply and critically about all aspects of professional practice with children and families. It occurs spontaneously as well as in essential planned reflection time. Most importantly, reflective practice leads to action.

Children's learning and development is advanced when they experience interactions with highly effective early childhood professionals. Early childhood professionals become more effective through critical reflection and a strong culture of professional enquiry.

Effective practice is strengthened when early childhood professionals:

- gather information and use it to inform, review and enrich decision-making, including the views and perspectives of the children
- draw on expertise beyond the team to gain clear and shared understandings and to inform new directions
- reflect with children and families as collaborators to create more inclusive environments to advance each child's learning and development
- collaborate with professionals in other disciplines to provide, receive and consider multiple perspectives, encouraging every person's contribution
- use sound evidence to inform planning for children's progress in learning and development
- apply evidence based practices to advance children's learning and development
- embrace professional learning and skill development that aligns with priorities for setting, service or network improvement
- review and evaluate to inform ongoing improvement
- challenge and change some practices to incorporate new understandings into practice.

(VEYLDF, P. 8)

FOLLOW EFFECTIVE ACTION WITH QUIET REFLECTION. FROM THE QUIET REFLECTION WILL COME EVEN MORE EFFECTIVE ACTION

(PETER DRUCKER)

AN EDUCATIONAL LEADER IN AN EDUCATION AND CARE SETTING SAID: "REFLECTIVE PRACTICE GIVES YOU A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHY THINGS HAPPEN. A FEW YEARS AGO OUR REFLECTIONS AMOUNTED TO REFLECTING ON THE DAY – WAS IT SUCCESSFUL? WHAT MIGHT WE DO NEXT? NOW IT'S MUCH DEEPER AND MORE FOCUSED ON WHAT EACH OF US DID AND DIDN'T DO AND HOW THAT CONTRIBUTED TO OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN. THIS CAN BE REALLY CONFRONTING."

Reflection is more than thinking and discussing – it is also about deconstructing, unpacking or pulling things apart to gain better understanding, seeing connections and appreciating different perspectives. Reflection can help you to:

- recognise and continue good practices
- change and improve what is not working well
- challenge practices that are taken for granted
- monitor all aspects of practice on an ongoing basis
- know when you need to find more information or support from others.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IS STRENGTHENED WHEN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS GATHER INFORMATION, INCLUDING THE VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES OF EACH CHILD AND USE IT TO INFORM, REVIEW AND ENRICH DECISION MAKING .

(VEYLDF P. 8)

Reflective process

You may be familiar with other terms that describe the process shown above:

- What? So what/Why? What next?
- Document/Analyse/Plan/Implement/Review
- Record/Reflect/Plan/Act/Evaluate
- Observe/Reflect/ Respond /Evaluate.

The particular words are not important. By and large they describe the same ongoing process: looking and listening, thinking deeply about the meaning of what you have seen and heard, using that thinking to inform your practice and continually responding and reflecting.

Note that reflection occurs at every stage, and the process can happen in almost any order.



THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS IN ACTION

Collect information –
Think deeply about all aspects of practice

The educators working in an education and care setting were concerned about several newly enrolled babies and toddlers whose families had arrived recently as refugees from Somalia. The parents and the children were finding separation difficult. The children were not enjoying mealtimes and did not settle at rest times. The strategies that the educators had used previously to provide support for children and families in transition periods did not seem to be working well.

At a staff meeting the Coordinator asked questions to help the educators reflect more deeply about their concerns for the children and families and what they could do to support them:

Question/Analyse –
Use critical questions to challenge assumptions and analyse current practice

Learn about yourself and how you work with children and families

- Why are the strategies we have previously used to help children and families settle and feel safe and welcome in the centre not working?
- What do we know about Somali culture and child rearing practices?
- What do we know about these particular children?
- What might we need to think about?
- What could we do differently?
- Who or what could help us?

Through reflecting on, researching and debating these questions, the educators recognised that although there were families and children from diverse cultural backgrounds in the setting, most of the educators had not worked with recently arrived refugee children and families.

Some educators thought that it was 'just a matter of time' and the children and families would 'settle in due course'.

The discussion also revealed that there were some misunderstandings about which country in Africa these families came from and their experiences as refugees.

One educator suggested, 'Maybe our previous transition strategies work well for some families and children, but they are not working here and we can't just hope time will make it better.'

Plan

Further discussion helped the team to understand the implications of the fact that these were families whose experiences differed from those of other families in the centre, including migrant families.

Act/Do –
Take action as a result of deep thinking and critical questioning

The educators decided that they needed to act and not wait, as the children's and families' wellbeing was a priority for them. They planned immediate and longer-term actions including:

- re-arranging the morning roster so that there was an additional educator available to welcome families and help children settle in.
- working with an interpreter to discuss the transition experiences with the families, understand from their perspective why it was difficult and get ideas from them that might make it work better.
- asking families for suggestions for meals that could be prepared for all the children at lunchtime so that the smells and tastes as well as the way the food was served would be more familiar for the new children.

Reflect/ Review

- asking families about sleeping practices at home so that they could include adaptations of these in their current sleep or rest routines.
- finding more specific information about refugee experiences and the likely impact on children and families to help increase the educators' professional knowledge and decision-making capacity.

The new practices or strategies that flowed from the actions had some immediate positive outcomes for the children and families.

The educators continued with the long-term actions and made changes to practice as they adopted suggestions from the families and gained deeper insights from other resources.

This example shows how a group of professionals used a process of reflection that:

- helped them to think deeply and differently about an issue of concern
- encouraged and respected families' contributions and suggestions
- led to a series of actions
- made a significant difference for children and families' wellbeing
- improved their understanding about refugee families and children
- reinforced the importance of working in an inclusive manner within a diverse community.

Case study

Educators working in a school-age care service are using reflective practice at their staff meetings. The issue of homework and its place in an after school program was a focus for reflection after a parent requested that his child complete her homework before being allowed to play. The current practice was to allow children to do their homework if they wanted to but not to actively encourage this. The educators decided to ask all the families and the children about their views on this issue by sending home a simple survey for the families and talking with the children during the program.

There were different perspectives on the issue including:

- Homework should be done at home so we know what the children are doing at school.
- Children need to relax after school.
- It makes it much easier for families and children if the homework is completed before pick up.
- Homework should be finished before the children play.

The educators shared the different views with families and children and decided to make some small changes to their practice. They set up a 'homework space' in the room and talked with the children about the advantages of getting their homework completed anytime during the session. Some children said that it was good to do homework at the after school program because there were plenty of resources available if they needed them. The educators have noticed that more children are doing their homework than previously since they made these changes.

Discussion starter

A parent asked a family day care educator why she didn't teach her four-year-old son the alphabet. The parent said she thought it was important for her child to know the alphabet before he started school the following year. The educator explained to the mother that while she didn't teach the alphabet through lessons, there were many opportunities where the children learnt about written words and the letters of the alphabet. She gave examples, such as when the children looked at a recipe with her, recognised their names on the placemats, or asked for help to write their name on a drawing.

Later, the family day care educator talked with her field worker about the request and together they discussed the ways the program supported children's literacy development and learning. They also discussed how the educator could talk about this with families.

Think about what you know about early literacy and how you would define it.

You might find it helpful to look at Learning and Development Outcome 5 in the VEYLDF: Children are effective communicators, which highlights the many different ways young children learn literacy and language skills, including through spoken language, gestures and actions.

Think about the ways you teach language and literacy to young children. How does your everyday practice support children to be effective communicators? What more do you need to know about children's literacy and language development? Where could you find this information?

Think about the issue in the example from different perspectives (child, parent, educators, and the school). Whose perspective do you focus on most? Why? Is there a conflict between your philosophy, your commitment to partnerships and this request? Can you explain the reasons for this conflict?

What have you learned about yourself and how you work with children and families? Be honest as you think about and discuss this. For example:

- Have you learned anything about why you are sometimes unable to meet families' requests and your feelings about that?
- What have you learned about your own willingness to be flexible? Are there some areas where you are more flexible than others? If so why?
- What have you learned about looking critically at an issue and from different perspectives as a way of helping you to see it more clearly?

If you were the educator in this example, would you change your practice or take action as a result of your reflection on the parent's request? Identify your reasons.

- How would you explain your decision to the family?
- How would you monitor any changes you set up?

Reflective questions

- How do you work respectfully with families who have different expectations of the service you provide?
- What kind of support do you access to guide your decision making in these situations?

Reflection on action and reflection in action

In his research, Schön made a useful distinction between reflection on action (thinking after the event) and reflection in action (thinking on your feet). Both are integral to being a professional. The following examples explore this distinction.

Reflection on action

A Maternal and Child Health (MCH) team has a reflective practice session once a month with an outside facilitator to reflect on their practice and de-brief with colleagues. Each nurse brings a real situation that he or she is dealing with for discussion. The aim is that this approach transfers over to their daily work. One positive outcome of these sessions is that they encourage collaboration, as traditionally these MCH nurses have worked largely alone.

Reflection in action

An educator working with toddlers in an education and care setting described how she practised reflection in action with a colleague when they were going to remove a toy that two children were fighting over. The educator suggested that they stop and think about whether this was the only solution before they removed the toy. She asked the following questions:

- How could we give the children a voice in the decision making process?
- Is the main reason for removing the toy that it makes life easier for us?
- Does removing the toy help children learn about waiting for a turn?
- If we leave the toy, how can we support the children to deal with this?

The educators agreed to leave the toy and support the child who was waiting for a turn by telling him he would get a turn soon and playing with him until that happened.

Think about this example.

- What would be good reasons for removing or not removing the toy?
- Who would be advantaged or disadvantaged if the toy was removed?
- What long-term outcomes for the children might their decision not to remove the toy reflect? How does the decision link to the Outcomes for learning and development?

Reflection on action and reflection in action are both important practices for professionals' committed to ongoing professional development and learning.

The facilitated reflection on action that the MCH nurses engaged in helps them to learn new ways of working through sharing ideas and thinking collaboratively about practice.

Reflecting in practice helps professionals to challenge practices in a collegial way. It leads to better curriculum decision making. Reflecting in practice is also useful in contexts where it is difficult to find time away from the children to reflect with colleagues. Professionals can bring their experiences of reflection in practice to team meetings or professional learning sessions for further discussion as reflection on practice.

REFLECTING ON AND
IN PRACTICE HELPS
PROFESSIONALS TO
FOCUS ON LONG AND
SHORT TERM OUTCOMES
FOR CHILDREN AND
FAMILIES AND HOW
THESE MIGHT BE BEST
ACHIEVED.

Reflective questions

- What changes in practice have come from reflecting on and in your practice?
- Can you identify further opportunities for reflection on and in practice in your setting?
- What is one step you can take to create or strengthen a culture of critical reflection in your workplace?

WHY REFLECT?

Reflective practice leads to higher quality practice and better outcomes for children and families.

Professionals who reflect are more aware of their own values and beliefs and are more likely to challenge and change ineffective practice and improve practice. The nature of work as a professional is that every day you face challenging situations that are often new and ethically complex. There are many decision points and no recipes to follow. Professionals have to use their values, knowledge and experience to make meaning of what is happening. Reflection assists you to unpack your values, knowledge and experiences as you consider the present issue, interest or concern.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IS STRENGTHENED WHEN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS CHALLENGE AND CHANGE SOME PRACTICES TO INCORPORATE NEW UNDERSTANDINGS INTO PRACTICE.

(VEYLDF P.8)

For example, reflective practice can lead to more inclusive environments for all children and families. Trying to see situations from families' and children's perspectives can help professionals to consider whether all families and children experience a sense of belonging. As a result, they can create more inclusive environments.

Reflective practice can lead you to seek out the research; resources and advice you need to deepen your understanding and improve your practice.

Shared reflective practice can promote collaboration between professionals from diverse professional backgrounds and settings. Reflective practice appears in the professional standards for many early childhood professionals including the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care 2011 (Appendix 1).

Case study

In a kindergarten where two children with additional needs participate, all the early childhood professionals, including educators, speech pathologists and early childhood intervention specialists, have regular planning meetings. They bring different specialist expertise and experiences to these discussions as they reflect collaboratively and respectfully about each child and family from diverse perspectives. They also talk with families to gain their perspectives. One of the professionals explained, 'this reflection helps us to get an holistic view of each child rather than a picture of a child who has physical, social or cognitive delays or issues'.

This example of reflection shows commitment by a group of professionals to their respective professional codes of practice and to the collaborative and reflective practice principles in the VEYLDF. Through the planning meetings they combine their knowledge and skills to:

- gain a deeper understanding of each child and family
- make shared planning decisions based on shared evidence and knowledge
- learn from and with each other as they maintain their specialism
- work together with families and children to ensure that long and short term learning and development goals are achieved
- embed an ongoing approach to evaluation and assessment.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IS STRENGTHENED WHEN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS COLLABORATE WITH PROFESSIONALS IN OTHER DISCIPLINES TO PROVIDE, RECEIVE AND CONSIDER MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES, ENCOURAGING EVERY PERSON'S CONTRIBUTION.

(VEYLDF, P. 8)

Reflective questions

- Why is it helpful to have different perspectives on children?
- What does it mean to have a 'holistic view of the child'? Why is it important?
- How does having a holistic view of children affect the way you plan for their learning and development?

HOW DO I GO ABOUT REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?

Ultimately the aim of reflective practice is to build a learning community committed to quality improvement. Learning communities are committed to:

- embedding reflective practice into everyday practice at all levels
- ongoing learning for all professionals
- learning with and from children and families, community members and other professionals
- questioning whose rights or interests are being met by existing practices and the assumptions underlying those practices
- continuous improvement of all aspects of practice.

Below are some strategies for building a learning community with a culture of reflective practice.

Reflective journal

Journals or diaries can be a good place for professionals to record their thinking about all aspects of their practice (for example, relationships, interactions, teaching and learning, assessment, environments).

Journal entries can include stories about practice, meaningful words, drawings, symbols, articles and photographs to be used as prompts for reflection or reminders for thinking and discussion.

Wikispaces or blogs can be a good way to share reflections with colleagues.

Meetings

Putting aside time regularly for focused discussion about practice with colleagues helps to ensure that reflection becomes regular practice. In some settings, time is put aside at meetings for critical reflection. In others, whole meetings are dedicated to critically reflecting on practice. Examples include breakfast meetings for room leaders, meetings for those working with specific age groups in education and care settings, and meetings with professionals from across a network or community. It is important to have a facilitator who uses critical questions to stimulate discussion and deep thinking, and to record the discussion and the actions that arise.

"I STARTED BY PUTTING A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL IN EVERY ROOM. I WANTED THE REFLECTIONS TO BE TRANSPARENT. I WANTED EDUCATORS TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER. IT APPEARED THAT IT WAS EASIER TO WRITE IN A JOURNAL THAN TO TALK ABOUT ISSUES. WE FOLLOWED THIS UP WITH WEEKLY BRIEFING SESSIONS DURING CHILDREN'S REST TIME. EDUCATORS WERE SURPRISED TO FIND OUT HOW OTHERS FELT ABOUT SOME ISSUES."

(EDUCATIONAL LEADER IN AN EDUCATION AND CARE SETTING)

Case study

An educational leader in an education and care setting holds meetings for all educators who want to come. At the first one she asked each person to talk briefly about something they were interested in. At the end of the meeting each person identified one action – something they would go away and try – and they reported on this at the next meeting.

Case study

One coordinator holds small meetings focused on curriculum with the educators who work with children under three years. She found that many of them had opinions but wouldn't speak up in a larger meeting. She began by asking them to talk about their vision of childhood and followed this with the question 'What does early childhood education mean for babies and toddlers?' Then she asked each person to identify what they thought was the most important thing for the children they work with to learn. Responses included independence, getting along with others, and communicating. Each person was able to identify something. She then asked each person to discuss what he or she did to help children learn these things, how they could improve and what the obstacles were.

Mentor or critical friend

A mentor or critical friend, who guides, asks questions, offers a different perspective, and provides resources and shares skills can be invaluable. It should be someone who will challenge and encourage you to consider different perspectives. The mentor can be a colleague or someone from outside the workplace. Mentoring can be face-to-face, over the phone or online.

"OUR 'OUTSIDE PERSON' TO SUPPORT REFLECTIVE PRACTICE CHANGED ALONG WITH US IN THE PROCESS OF WORKING WITH US. IT'S A SLOW PROCESS THAT HAS TO START WITH WHAT EDUCATORS FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH – IT'S NOT A SYSTEM YOU CAN PUT IN PLACE IN A HURRY. YOU HAVE TO THINK A LOT ABOUT THE BEST WAY TO GO."

(EDUCATOR IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP POSITION IN A LONG DAY CARE SERVICE)

Reflective practice notice board

Designated notice boards for highlighting reflections about practice can help to include families and other professionals who work in the setting in critical reflection. Posters, photographs, quotes from the VEYLDF, articles, books, and critical questions can provoke thinking and conversation.

Case study

A team leader in an education and care setting wanted to encourage engagement with and conversations about the VEYLDF among colleagues, particularly those who work with babies. She decided to put up posters with some of the main messages of the Frameworks and questions relating to them. She provided pens for colleagues to write comments in response to the questions. This simple strategy seemed to engage people more than just talking.

Professional learning experiences

Professional learning experiences can be a catalyst for reflecting on practice individually or with others. These experiences help you to think about different ways of working and addressing problems as well as affirming the things you do well.

Professional learning experiences include:

- visiting other settings and talking to professionals doing similar work
- joining a network
- working in another setting through a staff 'swap' arrangement
- participating in professional learning programs
- reading literature on theories and practice with young children and families
- attending conferences
- enrolling in formal studies that lead to a qualification.

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IS STRENGTHENED WHEN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS EMBRACE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT THAT ALIGNS WITH PRIORITIES FOR SETTING, SERVICE OR NETWORK IMPROVEMENT. (VEYLDF P. 8)

Action research

Action research is an approach to professional practice involving a cycle of reflection and investigation on a topic of interest, a concern or a question about practice within a setting. The process is systematic, ethical, participatory and collaborative. The term research in this context is about finding evidence about the topic or concern through strategies such as observations, collecting information or interviews. This evidence is compared with or linked to professional literature on the focus for the research. Actions are taken in response to the findings of the literature and the practice evidence. The actions are monitored and evaluated and revised if necessary and the cycle begins again. For a detailed discussion of action research see Appendix 2.

WHAT DO PROFESSIONALS REFLECT ON?

Reflecting on your philosophy

In reflecting on your philosophy or the philosophy in your setting, consider:

- your perceptions of children, parents and families and yourself as a professional
- children's rights and the extent to which children's views are taken into account in practice
- professionals' roles in children's and families' lives
- professionals' influence in children's and families' lives, and how that influence supports families to feel confident about their parenting
- the extent to which your practices reflect cultural competence; that is, your understanding of and respect for families' and children's cultures and communities
- how to give children opportunities to express their own thoughts and feelings and support their sense of agency
- your own prejudices and biases
- your beliefs and values.

Discussion starter

You have started at a new service that needs to develop a service philosophy to underpin its policies and practices.

- How will you initiate this process?
- Who will be involved? Why?
- Who can help with this process?
- How can the VEYLDF support the development of your philosophy?
- What theories about child development, learning and curriculum will underpin your philosophy?

Reflecting on values and beliefs

Professionals have beliefs about:

- themselves (for example: I am client oriented, I see myself as providing a service, I have professional expertise)
- families (for example: families are the most important people in children's lives, families are 'the problem')
- children (for example: children are capable; children are interested learners from birth, children are needy and vulnerable).

Case study

It is possible to have conflicting beliefs. For example, an MCH nurse spoke about her belief that babies are both clever and need protection because they are so young. Thinking about these different beliefs helped her to understand why she had them, whether or not they were appropriate and how they affected the conversations she had with families. She reflected that her belief that babies are clever or capable had developed over time as she observed many babies and talked with their families.

Discussion starter

Think about the statements in the table and identify the practices in your setting that support or match them.

Identify further practices you could implement to reflect these statements.

STATEMENT:

Children are capable, interested learners from birth.

PRACTICE:

STATEMENT:

Families are the most important people in children's lives.

PRACTICE:

Every professional brings values to their work. These values inform the decisions they make. Values come from life experiences, especially early ones within the family and community, as well as from professional study and experience. You may be aware of some of your values and unaware of others.

In addition, there are shared values and beliefs in every setting, including values and beliefs about how children learn and develop. Often these are expressed in a philosophy statement and then enacted in policies and procedures.

It is important to be aware of your own assumptions, values and beliefs and their impact on your practice. This awareness can come through discussing and comparing your views with others.

Reflective questions

Can you articulate some of the key values that inform your work with children and families?

- If so, where do these come from?
- How do they affect your practice?
- Would your values and beliefs be similar or different to those of other professionals who work in your setting or those of the families in your community?
- How could you find out about others' views?
- Why might others hold different values and beliefs?
- What strategies can you use to negotiate shared understandings across different values or beliefs?

Reflecting on practice

Below are some examples of practice related topics for critical reflection:

- Pedagogy and how it connects with the Practice Principles and the Learning and Development Outcomes in the Victorian Framework
- How practices and the physical environment acknowledge and encourage children's sense of agency
- Induction and orientation for families who are new to the setting and the extent to which they set the stage for partnerships
- The variety and effectiveness of communication with families
- Ways of encouraging families to share ideas, concerns, priorities
- Evidence of and challenges associated with balancing the needs and priorities of families and those of children
- Links with other services that support families and children
- Cultural bias and whether it is evident in practice
- Who is not attending? Why? What strategies might change that?
- The physical environment and possible improvements
- The extent to which the environment reflects the cultures, communities and lives of the families and children
- Practices that are taken for granted.

Case study

Facilitators of a supported playgroup needed to critically reflect continually. There were lots of issues, including tensions between some of the parents. As one of the facilitators said, 'The moods of certain parents could hijack the session. We were faced with a complicated balancing act of containing the stress of individual parents and creating some fun for the whole group'.

One facilitator suggested that perhaps the group needed more routine and structure to 'hold it together'. They agreed to try gathering adults and children together for about 20 minutes. The other facilitator had reservations but agreed to try it. They also had a goal to encourage reading to, and singing with, children. They wanted to use the group time to model good teaching with children. Because parents have issues themselves, they felt that it was easy to get so caught up with the parents' concerns that they overlooked the children's needs.

They set up the environment in a very predictable way, so that children and adults knew what to expect.

After trying the more structured approach and monitoring it continually, they believe that the structure helps to 'hold' not only the children and parents, but themselves as well.

A facilitator said "We ask ourselves the question of whether the group is maybe more for parents than for children, but maybe it doesn't matter so long as it works. All the time we're thinking how the parents are and whether or not what we're offering is working for the children. We have to be very flexible and prepared to change our plans – to go outside for example if things are tense". They also reflect on the amount of structure and predictability and how they contribute to children's and adults' feelings of security and safety in the playgroup.

The examples above show that you can reflect on relatively minor aspects of practice as well as on more important issues. Reflection can focus on families, community, policies and professionals as well as on children.

Reflective questions

- What do the educator's comments in the above example about 'taking it deeper' mean?
- Why is it a good idea to reflect more deeply? What are the risks if you don't think deeply about all aspects of your practice?

"YOU CAN START WITH ANY TOPIC SO LONG AS YOU TAKE IT DEEPER. FOR EXAMPLE, WE HAVE RECENTLY REFLECTED ON THE USE OF DUMMIES AT REST TIME AND WHY CHILDREN MIGHT BE DISTRESSED AT NOT HAVING THEM. LAST YEAR WE EVEN DID SOME REFLECTIVE PRACTICE ABOUT THE STAFF DRESS CODE AS A RESULT OF A STAFF MEMBER WEARING A SINGLET TO WORK."

(EDUCATIONAL LEADER IN AN EDUCATION AND CARE SETTING)

Practices that are taken for granted

Examining practices that are considered 'the way I/we do things here' can be a good way to start reflecting on practice. Looking at these practices from different perspectives can lead to new insights and new ways of doing things.

Case study

In one education and care setting time is set aside at each staff meeting for reflecting on practices that are taken for granted. At one of the meetings, the policy of 'no toys from home' was the topic for discussion. Critical questions were used to focus the discussion:

- Does the 'no toys from home' policy conflict with children's rights?
- Who is advantaged by this policy and who is disadvantaged?
- Does the 'no toys from home' policy prevent children from bringing a link from home, which can help foster a sense of belonging and connectedness?
- Does the policy restrict our capacity to build on children's interests, as many children were intensely interested in stories and characters they knew from television and movies?
- What do children and families think about this policy?
- What might be the benefits for children if the policy were changed?
- What could be unintended outcomes from a policy change? Through unpacking the reasons for having this policy the educators realised that part of the rationale was that it made things easier for them because it reduced the need to manage issues such as ownership and loss of toys. The educators realised the policy needed to be balanced with the views of children and families.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS USE SOUND EVIDENCE TO INFORM
PLANNING FOR CHILDREN'S PROGRESS IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
EXPERIENCES AND PRACTICE

(VEYLDF, P. 8)

Discussion starter

In one kindergarten, the children always have indoor experiences followed by a group experience and then go outside for the outdoor program.

At a staff meeting a new staff member said that she found the separation between indoor and outdoor experiences difficult to manage. She was used to working in a centre where children could choose to participate in outdoor or indoor learning experiences as both spaces and experiences were available at the same time.

Reflect on your responses to the questions below with colleagues and compare the similarities and differences and the reasons for these. You could also adapt these questions to examine practices that are taken for granted in your setting.

- What beliefs underlie this practice?
- What are the benefits for children from the current practice?
- What are the benefits for educators from the current practice?
- Who would benefit from changing to an indoor-outdoor program? What might those benefits be?
- Does the current practice limit children's sense of agency and capacity for decision making?
- What would children and families think about a different approach to the program?
- What challenges might arise from adopting an indoor-outdoor program?
- How could those challenges be addressed?
- Could a change improve learning and development outcomes for children?
- If a decision were made to change the program how would educators know if it has been worthwhile for children's learning and development?
- How long would the educators need to trial the change?
- If some educators were unsure about making this type of program change, what might help to address their concerns?

Reflective questions

- How might the VEYLDF help you examine your practices?
- Identify a question or topic that attracts your attention or interest:
 - Why does this question interest you?
 - How will you start reflecting deeply on it?
 - With whom will you reflect?

WITH WHOM DO PROFESSIONALS REFLECT?

Personal or individual reflection

"Some critical reflection is deeply personal and won't be shared until some time has elapsed and you feel ready to talk about what you learned about yourself."
(Co-ordinator in an education and care setting)

Shared reflection

"Critical reflection can't be just by yourself. Just saying something out loud to someone else can help fill in holes and can sometimes help you to find answers."
(Educator responsible for professional learning in an education and care setting)

Learning together with colleagues draws upon the diverse knowledge, experiences, views and attitudes of individuals in the group.

Shared reflective practice can occur through conversation and debate with:

- colleagues
- other professionals working in the same setting
- professionals working in another setting
- a professional network such as a transition to school network
- families and children.

Shared reflection requires trust. Professionals are more likely to be honest and open to new ways of thinking and acting when they trust each other and feel confident that their ideas will be taken seriously.

Reflecting with families

Children learn in the context of their families, and families are the primary influence on children's learning and development. The VEYLDF Practice Principle Partnerships with families reminds early childhood professionals about the importance of building mutually respectful, collaborative partnerships with families. Shared reflective practice with families can support partnership building.

Professionals can use families' knowledge and understanding of their child by reflecting with families on:

- their values, culture and traditions and what that might mean for practice
- their understanding of their child's interests, strengths and abilities
- their priorities or aspirations for their child and how you as an early childhood professional can support these goals
- the child's progress toward the Learning and Development Outcomes
- their perspectives on play and learning
- how the family and professionals can work together to progress the child's learning and development
- how they experience the early childhood setting
- opportunities for learning in everyday experiences within the home or community.

Partnerships with families and reflective practice involve going beyond simply reporting to families by discussing the child's experience and planning collaboratively with them.

Discussion starter

Ask families:

- What do they value most about the early childhood setting – what are its strengths?
- What could be improved?

Discuss with families how these align with and differ from your own perceptions of strengths and areas for improvement.

If there are differences, make a plan to address them.

Reflecting with children: using reflection as a teaching and learning tool

Helping children to reflect supports and promotes learning in different ways. Reflective questioning or 'wondering aloud' helps children to think more deeply about their responses. Reflective questions are open, requiring answers other than yes or no.

Using reflective questions with children shows that you value their ideas and interests. These questions, when they engage children, can motivate them to persist as well as encourage them to try new strategies and experiences.

**REFLECT WITH CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES AS
COLLABORATORS TO
CREATE MORE INCLUSIVE
ENVIRONMENTS
TO ADVANCE EACH
CHILD'S LEARNING AND
DEVELOPMENT
(VEYLDF, P. 8)**

Displaying or documenting children's work can help to make children's reflection visible by including their words about how they learned, what they learned and who or what helped them to learn.

The following table provides examples of reflective questions that support teaching and learning. These strategies link closely with Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners.

TEACHING AND LEARNING PURPOSE	REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS OR THINGS TO WONDER ABOUT
Help children to connect current learning with past experiences or learning (transfer of learning from one context to another)	Do you remember when we...? What do you remember about...? What do you know about...?
Help children to build on existing skills or knowledge	What other ways could you...? What do you want to know more about? I'm wondering how you...?
Support children to reflect on what they already know and can do	What do you know about...? How do you know that? Who helped you to learn...?
Help children think about where they can find more information about things that interest them and who could help them to find that information	How can we find out more? Where would we find that information? Who could help us to find...?
Promote further exploration, investigation and hypothesising	What else might work? How could we fix this problem? What would happen if...?
Show that you value children's many ways of expressing their learning (what they know and can do)	What other ways could we...? How interesting that you... I've never thought about doing it that way...
Encourage learning from and with others (collaborative learning)	How could we learn from...? Why is it better to work with someone else to...?

Examples

The following examples show how to reflect with children using strategies that are appropriate for their age and for your purpose. Research shows that children whose views are respected are more likely to take responsibility for their actions than those whose views are not. The degree to which children feel 'in control' of their life affects their sense of wellbeing – even with babies. (Outcome 3).

Case study

Reflecting with children is practised in a rural OSHC program. The educators believe in the child's right to be consulted. They have found children participate more actively when they are consulted about the program. Every month, the children and educators discuss new content or ideas for the program, the skills and resources they might need and how the new ideas or content can build on the children's interests.

Case study

In an education and care setting an educator who was also a student completed a major assignment on consulting with children. When she began the assignment she believed that she was already consulting well, but through doing the assignment she found that she could improve. She shared these insights with the other team leaders. They came up with the idea of designing and completing a questionnaire and survey with the children about the food offered. She realised that the children were the ones eating and she hadn't consulted them! As a result, the food is now offered buffet style and the children can choose what they eat.

Case study

An MCH nurse observed babies' obvious interest in mobiles she had placed above the nappy change mats. Reflecting on this observation, the nurse decided to talk with parents about the benefits of having a conversation with their baby about the mobile while changing them.

Case study

A facilitator of a supported playgroup gave children paper and paint and asked them to paint a picture about what they liked about playgroup. She used the drawings to talk with the children about their paintings and wrote down what they said about what they enjoyed most at playgroup. She used that information to reflect on what they were offering and as a basis for making some changes.

Case study

A teacher working in a primary school described how he uses reflective practice to help him understand how children learn. Each day, he sets aside time to ask the children to reflect on their learning – what and how they learned and what helped or hindered. He has noted that dispositions such as persistence, resourcefulness and imagination help children to learn. He uses this knowledge to build or extend those learning dispositions throughout the day in different curriculum areas and experiences.

Discussion starter

Discuss with colleagues how you might get children's views about what they like and don't like about their experiences in your setting.

Focus on children's perspectives on either indoor or outdoor experiences or spaces.

You could do this by:

- talking with them
- paying attention to their moods and reactions during different parts of the experience or day
- encouraging them to discuss or draw the things they like and dislike
- encouraging them to take photographs of spaces or experiences they enjoy.

Make an action plan to address the parts that they aren't positive about. Where possible include children in developing the action plans. In your action plan include some strategies for identifying the positive (or unintended) outcomes from the changes you make.

Reflective questions

- What systems and processes do you have in place to reflect on children's learning and development and how best to support it?
- What systems and processes do you have in place to reflect with children about their learning and development and how best to support it?
- What systems and processes do you have in place to reflect with families about children's learning and development and how best to support it?

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APPENDIX 1: PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

A requirement for reflective practice appears in the codes of ethics, guides for practice and requirements for pre-service education for early childhood professionals, including:

- The National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care (2011)
- Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics (2016)
- Victorian Institute of Teaching Graduate and Teaching Standards of Professional Practice
- Speech Pathology Australia Code of Ethics (2010)
- Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia 2008

APPENDIX 2: ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is a conscious approach to the reflective process that is:

- ethical: the research is respectful of everyone's experience and contribution
- participatory: professionals are actively involved in the ongoing inquiry and action cycle
- collaborative: it involves all professionals working in the early childhood setting, children and families
- reflexive: Critical and serious thinking occurs about practices and theories that underpin practice.

Positive outcomes from action research approaches

Action research approaches support positive improvements in early childhood settings by:

- shifting the 'problem' from the child or the family ('If only the family would...' or 'If only this child could...') to the professional's responsibility to do something different: 'What could I/we do differently to support this child's learning or development?'
- promoting a professional approach to focusing on solving practical
- problems or exploring interests relevant to an early childhood setting
- fostering a cyclical approach that acknowledges that achieving quality practice is always unfinished business
- supporting practice-based evidence. Finding the evidence for changes and of the changes that occur after re-planning is central to the review, action and evaluation processes
- helping professionals to be accountable to families, children, funding or governing authorities. Action research can provide external and internal stakeholders with evidence that policies, standards and practices are achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

ACTION RESEARCH STEPS	EXAMPLE
<p>Identify a topic of interest that you want to find out more about or which you have questions (research focus).</p> <p>The broad aim is to improve practice and outcomes for children and families.</p> <p>Identify one or two questions to guide your research.</p>	<p>A centre was deciding whether or not to change from mixed age groups (birth to 5) to narrower age range groups (birth to 2, 2-3, 3-5 years).</p> <p>They identified two questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which is better to support children's learning: mixed-age or single-age groups? • Does having different age group experiences result in different learning and development outcomes for children?
<p>Review the issue or focus from different perspectives.</p>	<p>Staff read some literature on mixed-age and same-age groups to find out about the research evidence on these practices.</p> <p>They talked to parents about their observations about children learning (or not) from older or younger siblings.</p> <p>They talked to the older children about their ideas on learning with older or younger children.</p>
<p>Plan and enact a range of actions or strategies to help answer the questions that have been raised.</p> <p>Actions are focused on finding evidence about the question or focus for the research.</p>	<p>Educators' actions included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • observing children in different types of learning experiences and documenting what happened (outdoors) • videoing experiences – same age and mixed age groups (indoors). <p>The Action Plan was over a period of two weeks.</p>
<p>Evaluate and review the evidence (data) that has been collected in order to make sense of it for the next stage of decision making.</p>	<p>Educators used planning times and meetings to make sense of and analyse the evidence they had documented.</p> <p>Educators shared initial findings with families and older children for their feedback.</p>
<p>Plan further or re-plan actions based on what the evidence from both the literature and your own research has shown.</p> <p>Plans may need to be monitored to make sure that they are working and revised if they are not working to improve practice and outcomes for children and families.</p>	<p>Educators identified that younger children benefited from being with older children, especially in language development.</p> <p>Older children seemed to benefit socially when they played with younger children, as they were caring and supportive of the younger children.</p> <p>The practice evidence combined with the research evidence suggested that if the centre does change to narrower age groupings they should provide mixed-age groups for specific purposes across the day/week.</p>

Action research approaches: a word of caution

Actions taken as part of the approach could reinforce poor practices if critical inquiry or reflection is not fully understood and practised. Sometimes it is difficult to critically evaluate or examine practices without becoming defensive: 'It works for us, so why change it?' or resorting to a default position: 'We always do it this way'.

Action research approaches may challenge professionals who will require new skills and knowledge in order to confidently participate in the process.

Developing and sustaining quality is a complex matter that cannot be simplified into a checklist or achieved without effort and commitment. Action research approaches are helpful for ensuring that quality is understood as everyone's responsibility and something that can only be achieved through planning responses based on continuous critical inquiry.

