

Being an Early Childhood Educator: A Self-reflection

Context and Purpose

A successful teacher not only teaches, but also motivates (Bean-Mellinger 2018). Therefore, as a future early childhood educator, it is important for me to know and understand the vital skills required in practice in order to deliver effective guidance to young learners. As the AITSL (2018) rightly outlined, the very first domain for the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers is to gain professional knowledge. Then, based on this knowledge, one can practise and engage as an educational professional. With that in mind, I embark on a self-reflective discussion to assess my skills and knowledge as an early childhood educator and to gain a structured understanding of my potential growth areas in this field. Reflections are an essential part of educators' professional development and remain fundamental to their lifelong learning (Aizan et al 2014).

Theories Guiding the Reflection

Reflections are a process and also a product at the same time (Yancey 1998). Similar views were propagated by another theorist – Schön (1983, 1987), who provided a framework whereby professionals can learn best by constructing and reconstructing their professional experiences. He called these reflection-in-action (gaining knowledge while in practice) and reflection-on-action (gaining knowledge by critiquing/analysing one's own actions/behaviours). I believe that an educator is no exception to such reflective growth. For example, there is certain knowledge about effective teaching that I possess currently as an aspiring educator, but these might be readjusted or reconstructed based on my actual experiences in the practice.

There are also many models of reflection, some of which were widely used in reflective practices, such as those proposed by theorists Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (1984). While Kolb's model, called 'experiential learning', comprises a simpler four stage process (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation), Gibbs' slightly more elaborate six-stage framework provides a basis to examine the experiences (describing the experience, feelings about the experience, evaluating the

experience, analysing it, concluding on the knowledge gained and putting knowledge into action). Both these frameworks are essentially built on Schön's theories of reflection-in-action (doing stage) and reflection-on-action (discovering stage). I think this is also the best approach that I can adopt in future as a practising teaching professional – I would need to build on current knowledge constantly based on real experiences and design my strategies accordingly. It will be a continuous process of learning and relearning to strengthen the ties between knowledge, skills and practice, as mentioned in the AITSL (2018). Even as I prepare myself as an educator, my reflections-in-action inform that apart from having the relevant degrees, I need to have good communication skills, patience in handling children, passion for teaching and a respect for diversity. However, when I participate in projects with peers and emulate teaching in real life-like situations, I understand my shortcomings in communication and also in identifying potentials for external partnership (families, other occupational therapists, etc.). So, these form my reflections-on-action. The reflections in this document are a combination of these two and are presented with Gibbs' reflective cycle in mind.

Situation Description

I opted to earn a degree in early childhood education as I had always wanted to be a teacher, out of my passion for teaching and love for children. In every situation that involved children in my personal life (family gatherings or walk in the neighbourhood), I have always found children being fond of me. They love my company, I do not have to force any conversation with them and mutual appreciations generally flow. I even role-played being a teacher to my young siblings in the family many times. So when my father (who is a lawyer) wanted me to study law, I revolted. I asserted taking up this course. During my vocation as an early childhood educator, I have constructed lesson plans, brainstormed pedagogies with peers, emulated practice in early childhood contexts, assessed my own and others' teaching performances, innovated strategies for teaching Aboriginal students, and many more challenging tasks pertaining to early childhood teaching.

My Feelings

In the initial days of the course, I was very happy and content, thinking that I had been smart and efficient in handling most tasks. However, gradually the challenges unfolded with more practical exposure into the real early childhood classroom situations. There were moments of frustration and anguish and the course seemed an uphill task, but soon after I felt determined to overcome the challenges, which went beyond a mere love for teaching and children. In

Australia, early childhood teachers are required to possess “a strong understanding of the intent of the EYLF and the complexity with which each child encounters the intended outcomes through their own learning and the learning of others” (Harcourt & Jones 2016, p 84).

Evaluation

My experiences as an aspiring early childhood educator are a mixture of good and bad. While I fared really well in handling interpersonal relationships, cultural diversity and conflicts, and also planned and executed the curriculum satisfactorily, my skills were lacking in integrating student families effectively and using other occupational therapists appropriately. I also needed to improve more on my communication skills, although I could fairly achieve responsive engagement and could build positive, respectful relationships with the children.

Peer feedback further revealed my strengths and weaknesses more clearly as it provided divergent perspectives on my teaching capabilities and offered me a deeper understanding of the learning experiences I have achieved. My Johari window assessment is as follows:

	Known to Self	Unknown to Self
Known to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amicable • Hard-working • Organised • Self-motivated • Helpful • Energetic • Creative • Loves to read • Loves music • Addicted to fitness 	<p><u>Peer feedback:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependable • Sensitive • Good sense of humour • Self-conscious • Accommodative / Flexible • Logical • Curious
Unknown to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous • Assertive • Love for sci-fi movies • Dreams of running a school someday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tense • Ingenious • Spontaneous

Self-Analysis

In my current capacity, I am providing experiences that include creation of play opportunities for children by asking open-ended questions to foster their imagination and autonomy. Although I have a natural tendency to help, I do not intervene immediately to allow them time to explore and engage. This also allows me to know the students and observe how they learn, which is in keeping with Standard 1 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

(AITSL 2018). This also aligns with Element 1.2.2 of the National Quality Framework (NQF), which is 'Responsive Teaching and Scaffolding' (ACECQA 2017). Every week, I document my observations as learning journal entries for every learner that helps me evaluate their learning needs better and plan more effectively (Intentional teaching practice – Element 1.2.1 of NQF). Creating play opportunities using my strengths of creativity developed their sense of wellbeing and identity – Outcome 1 and Outcome 3 of the EYLF (EYLF 2009).

My sense of humour and amicability, as discovered through the Johari window, helped me keep the environment fun and enjoyable. In future, this can help me achieve Standard 4 of the professional standards – creating supportive and safe learning environments. I can make students feel welcome. This also aligns with Element 5.1.1 of the NQF – 'Positive Educator to Child' interactions. Children will feel motivated to express themselves, thus becoming effective communicators – Outcome 5 of EYLF.

My skills in organisation, flexibility and sensitivity can serve as vital attributes of a successful educator. However, I believe that I need more improvement in engaging parents in decision-making. Inputs from families can help gather culturally relevant symbols (rhymes, pictures, etc.) that the students like and learning activities can be planned around that (Standard 3 of Professional Standards and NQF Element 5.1.2: Dignity and rights of the child). Thereby, I believe, children can start to become more confident and involved learners – EYLF Outcome 4. Involving parents/families are important standards in both the Australian professional standards (Standard 7) and the NQF (Quality Area 6: Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities). I need to build more knowledge and skills in this. I also need to understand how to integrate services of other professionals like child psychologists, speech therapists, etc.

I can accommodate people easily by virtue of being friendly and fun. So, I believe I am well positioned to achieve NQF Quality Area 5: Relationships with children. I am skilled at resolving conflicts or dissuading aggression, which is important for developing mutual respect among children (EYLF Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world). However, I need to hone my communication skills with more training and practice (Standard 6 of Professional Standards: Engage in professional learning and NQF Element 7.2.1: Continuous improvement). Therefore, I need to continuously engage in reflective practice, evaluating my skills and evolving into a better educator.

Knowledge Gained

One of the most important wisdoms I gained out of this self-reflective exercise is that documenting thoughts in a structured manner is essential for a definite and clear start towards self-improvement. That is perhaps why the importance of a reflective practice is highlighted across the Australian Professional Standards, NQF and the EYLF. Principle 5 of the EYLF mentions 'ongoing learning and reflective practice' for all educational staff. Indeed, it is a critical component of developing into an educator because it is a systematic and analytical exploration of teachers' own learning and professional practice (Lemon & Garvis 2014). Hence, I would suggest future educators to continue engaging in reflective practice lifelong. The Johari window can help get valuable insights from peers and colleagues. As for the reflective cycle framework, although I chose to use the Gibbs cycle, others can be equally helpful.

I also fathomed that communication is not just about speaking, especially in a culturally diverse context. So, when in one instance with an Aboriginal child, communicating in English posed a major problem and was impacting trust formation, I had to struggle with non-verbal cues and had no real strategy in place for conveying thoughts. No matter how much I endeavoured to make her feel included in the activities, she withdrew into a shell. Thereafter, I was guided to liaise with her family to know her better, her likes and dislikes, her background, etc. Relationship and learning both began to improve once I designed activities based on those inputs. The huge role of family partnership in early childhood education is one area that dawned upon me as I reflected on action.

Action Plan

These experiences and exposure into pre-service teaching in the early childhood context provided me helpful insights for developing an action plan as a future educator. Enlisting below the salient features of my action plan:

- I need to always maintain written documentation of my reflections (be it on self or others). For example, maintaining student learning journals can be a good way to track every learner's progress and develop different teaching strategies.
- I need to enhance my communication skills with relevant and meaningful professional training on the subject. I also need to apply such skills in every interaction (personal or professional) through the day to enhance efficiencies.

- I will keep myself updated on the Standards and Elements of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, the NQF and the EYLF. All of these three are closely linked and are essential frameworks to guide and inform the teaching practices in the country. So while the Professional Standards and NQF are the parameters all educators must know well, the EYLF is more about the children, their learning and development in the able hands of efficient teachers so that the prescribed outcomes are achieved.
- I need to focus on developing my skills around generating mutually beneficial engagements with parents/families, colleagues, other professionals/occupational therapists and the community at large. I deeply recognise that learning happens across the school and home continuum and therefore, encouraging parents/families to support learning at home is vital to achieving the EYLF learning outcomes.

Summing Up

Although I made mistakes (and still do) as I engage in teaching and upgrading myself as an early childhood educator, there are few valuable lessons I learned upon self-reflection. Some of these reflections happened while I performed tasks during my course and some happened after I performed the tasks and looked back at my performance. Either way, it offered me a clearer view of my strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, it allowed me to shape my belief that being an early childhood educator in Australia has a multi-faceted role – it does not stop at having sound content knowledge (academics), it also requires skillsets that can improve the physical, mental or emotional aspects of young learners.

References

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