

Reflective Practice

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Introduction

Reflective Practice underpins the National Quality Standard (NQS). To meet the NQS requirement for continuous improvement, educators are required to reflect upon their practices as individuals, and as part of their room and service teams. They are also required to document that reflection. However, many educators are still unsure what reflective practice really means and what it requires them to do.

This article clarifies what is meant by reflective practice, why it is so important, and then suggests a system to meet these requirements.

What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice occurs when educators:

- Review their current practice and identify what they can do differently
- Question and develop their knowledge, philosophy and ethics to inform and enrich their decision-making about their practices, particularly education and care outcomes for children.

Simply, it involves asking ourselves questions about what we do, why we do it, how we do it, and how we can do it a different way that would result in better outcomes for children, families and the service.

Reflective practice means being:

- Honest with ourselves about what we do
- Open to different ways of working
- Willing to change our ways.

Clarifying terms

The terms evaluation, reflection and reflective practice are often used interchangeably by mistake. They are connected, but they have different meanings.

When we evaluate, we assess events and daily occurrences and practices against objective criteria. For example, we might evaluate the way we change a toddler's nappy against the service's documented nappy change procedure. Our thoughts, feelings and philosophy are not relevant – only the facts about our practice.

Evaluation:

- Assesses events and practices against set criteria
- Is objective
- Is an important aspect of continuous improvement
- May occur alone or with others.

When we reflect, we revisit a situation or event. We think about how it occurred, the context, and also how we felt about it. Educators document their reflections in a variety of ways such as Reflection Sheets and Reflection Diaries. This documentation provides some of the source material for reflective practice.

Reflection:

- Revisits a situation or event, how it occurred and the context
- Is objective and subjective
- Provides some of the source material for reflective practice
- Is usually something we do alone.

Reflective practice involves reflecting on our current practice and the outcomes of that practice, and how we might change our practice for better outcomes. In other words, reflective practice goes one step further than reflection. It requires us to 'think about our thinking'. We still examine our practice – objectively and subjectively, as we do with reflection – but we also look at what informs our practice and what action is required to improve this practice.

Reflective practice can lead to changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as in practices. For example, we would examine our current nappy change practices and their outcomes for children together with the recommendations of recognised authorities. We would then use all of this information to help us to decide whether we need to make any changes to our practice.

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Reflective practice:

- Involves reflecting on our current practice and the outcomes of that practice, and how we might improve our practice for better outcomes
- Is objective and subjective
- Can lead to change
- Is usually undertaken with others.

To reflect effectively we need to consider:

- What questions we will ask
- When we will ask them
- How often we will ask them
- How and where we will document our thinking and responses.

The NQS is helpful here. It contains 168 reflective questions to guide our practices. The numbers of questions distributed across the seven quality areas are:

- QA1 Educational program and practice – 19
- QA2 Children's health and safety – 38
- QA3 Physical environment – 29
- QA4 Staffing arrangements – 16
- QA5 Relationships with children – 24
- QA6 Collaborative partnerships with families and communities – 26
- QA7 Leadership and service management – 16.

Not surprisingly, Quality Area 2 – Children's health and safety is prioritised, with 38 reflective questions suggested to guide our practices. However, the number of questions is only one of the aspects to consider. We also need to consider the content and complexity of the questions.

... services need to have a system in place to support regular reflective practice

For example, Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice only contains 19 questions, but we all know that we are expected to reflect on this area regularly.

In addition, 28 of these 168 reflective questions are relevant only to certain service types with particular age groups.

Ten questions relate to services with babies and toddlers, seven to those with school age children and eleven to Family Day Care services.

A widespread myth is that educators need to respond to all of the reflective questions as they are written in the NQS. This is not the case. We only need to demonstrate that we reflect upon our practices regularly, and that this reflection covers each of the seven quality areas. Many services develop their own questions that relate specifically to their setting, their way of operating or perhaps their philosophy. Because these questions address their specific concerns, they often better meet the NQS requirements for effective and meaningful reflective practice.

Systematic reflective practice

One way to demonstrate that the educators in your service reflect upon their practices is to have a structured system of reflective practice in place to support them. Your system should be:

- Simple
- Inclusive
- Regular
- Documented.

Service leaders need to:

- Communicate and direct educators to the relevant content of the NQS, Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and/or My Time, Our Place (MTO) framework.
- Develop a list of reflective questions to cover each of the seven quality areas of the NQS. This list could be based upon the reflective questions suggested in the NQS and/or consist of those developed to meet the specific needs of the service.

The list can be used as evidence of reflective practice if the date and method of reflection (i.e. individual, room team, service team) is recorded against the questions.

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- Require educators to reflect upon their practices at least three times per week, and document that reflection in a Reflection Diary. Remember the reflection needs to be on a topic or issue rather than be a general statement such as “The day went well” or “We had a good day”. Over time, you also need to cover all quality areas and to record that you have done so on your list of questions.
- Maintain a Service Reflection Diary in which all educators are required to write a brief comment about an issue identified by the nominated supervisor. An A3 folder works well. An example of an identified issue might be: “How do we help all families feel comfortable and welcome in our service?” The nominated supervisor may have chosen this question in response to an incident that has occurred or has been raised by an individual educator. The book or folder could be located near the staff sign-in area or in the staff room.
- Include reflective practice on the agenda for the monthly team meeting. This will ensure that time allocated to whole-of-service reflective practice is properly documented in Team Meeting Minutes.

Why is reflective practice so important?

Apart from the obvious – that we are required to do so to meet the NQS – reflective practice is important because it results in thoughtful decisions that are in the best interests of children and families. Without reflection, it is more than likely we will continue to use the same practices in the same way that we always have, and we lose the opportunity for improvement and better outcomes.

In addition to our individual reflection, we need to reflect with the other members of our room and service upon our shared knowledge, skills and practices. Further, we need to reflect upon how well each team meets the requirements of the NQS and the learning frameworks, namely EYLF and MTOP, and the relevant state or territory kindergarten learning guidelines.

Any areas or shortfalls we identify can be included in our Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). They can also be included in our service professional development plan and in the team mentoring arrangements.

Team reflection often identifies individual professional support needs. This information can then form part of our individual educator appraisals and professional support plans, just as the needs identified by our individual reflection do.

We will repeat this cycle many times throughout our careers and it will be a vital and integral part of the way we

work with children, their families, our colleagues and the community.

As stated earlier, the requirements for reflective practice are set out in the NQS. This document tells us what we have to do, but not how to do it. However, the NQS acknowledges us as educators with a professional responsibility to:

- Reflect on individual educator, team and whole-of-service questions across all quality areas.
- Undertake this reflection as a matter of course, and not wait until being told to do so.
- Accept that reflective practice adds to our underpinning knowledge about what we do and why.

Summary

The NQS requirement for reflective practice as a means of continuous improvement can only be met if educators understand what reflective practice is and what it involves. In addition, services need to have a system in place to support regular reflective practice – and its documentation – by individual educators, teams and the whole service. In this way, educators will continue to improve their knowledge, skills and practices to facilitate the best outcomes for children, families and the service.

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