

### 3 Reflective skills

Part of understanding the value of reflective practice as a tool for refining your teaching skills is recognising that the reflective process is itself a skill set. You may already use many of the skills involved in reflecting. As you read this chapter, try to identify the most recent teaching event in which you applied each skill discussed.

#### Describing your practice

The first step in reflecting on your teaching is to look back on a situation and describe it. It's like an anecdotal observation, in which you record the significant features of an event. In your description you will need to consider the following:

- *Adults present:* How many adults were present? What is their relationship to the children? Record each adult's age, background, culture and experience of early childhood education. Include any other information about them you consider relevant.
- *Children present:* How many children were present? What ages are they? At what stage of development are they? Describe their backgrounds, cultures and other relevant information.
- *Interactions:* What were the interactions between children and children, between children and adults, and between adults and adults?
- *Environment:* Describe the activities equipment. Were you indoors or outdoors? Describe the weather, routines and any other information you consider relevant.



While considering all of these issues, keep your description to a manageable length. Record those features that are most relevant to your reflection and omit other details. For example, as you are thoroughly familiar with the physical layout of your own early childhood setting, you should only have to describe it if you are reflecting on an event to which the layout contributed significantly.

#### Example: A reflection on rules

*Outdoors 15 Feb 1.10 pm*

*Adults 2: Myself, Adam*

*Children 10: ages 3 and 4 yrs*

*Children had finished lunch and story time. At 1.00 Adam and I arrived back from lunch and took the children outside. We had both been on inside duty in the morning.*

Before going outside children were told to put their sunhats on. Those without sunhats were told to get one from the box. J and S (boys, 4 yrs) both wanted the black hat, known as the favourite hat. There was a pulling fight for the hat and I stepped in.

M 'Be gentle with the hat – you may rip it if you pull too hard.'

J 'Let go S, it is my hat.'

S 'No, I had it first.'

This exchange continued, with neither boy letting go of the hat.

M 'I think you should both let go of the hat and give it to me while we talk about it.'

They did this.

M 'Why do you need this hat when there are lots of others in the box?'

J 'It's my turn. Kim [teacher now at lunch] said I could have it next.'

S 'I had the hat first and he took it off me'

Adam then came over to confirm that S did have the hat first. I then decided that it was only fair that S got the hat.

M 'Come on J, let's choose another hat from the box.'

J 'No, I want the black hat. It's my turn.' He went off to play with another group of children at the water trough.

M 'J, you have to have a hat on outside. Come and get one, or you will have to go inside.' He ignored me. I took a hat from the box and put it on his head. 'Now you will be safe from the sun.'

He took it off, throwing it on the ground. I picked it up.

M 'Put the hat on J, or you will have to go inside. You know it is a rule that you have to wear sunhats outside.'

J 'No.' I put it on his head again.

M 'Yes J, it is the rules.' Again the hat hit the ground.

M 'J, you will have to go inside to play now because you don't have a sunhat.' I took him by the hand to take him inside. He resisted, but I persisted and he was soon inside.

At 2.00 when Kim came back from lunch, J had gone to tell her that S wouldn't let him have the black hat. Kim then told me there had been a similar altercation in the morning, and she had dealt with it by suggesting turns. S had a turn in the morning, and J was to have a turn after lunch. I felt a real heel.

The above example shows the beginning of the reflection process in which the educator describes the situation. It provides sufficient information for you to deepen the reflection by considering the key elements before, during and after the event. These elements are likely to include the following:

- The event was concerned with implementing the rules of the early childhood setting. Children have to wear sunhats outside, so J had to be sent inside, didn't he? You could reflect on the importance of this rule and on the way that the rule is enforced.
- The setting's structure affected the event, as the total change of staff in the outdoor area meant that teaching strategies were not applied consistently across the day. Therefore you would reflect on the impact of the staff rostering system.
- You could reflect on your own practice. However, some information about your actions is missing. For example, what did you say to the boys when you gave the hat to S?

Caryl Hamer's *Observation: A Tool for Learning* (2000) is a useful early childhood resource on observation techniques.

## Identifying your feelings

In your reflection, identifying your personal feelings is an important part of the process – as important as describing the physical details of the event (Boyd and Myers 1988). You need to identify how you reacted emotionally to an event, so that you can explore how the event affected you.

There will be times when you think 'wow, that was great'. Reflecting on this feeling can help you to identify what made the experience positive, so that you can repeat it. Working with children produces many uniquely satisfying and fulfilling moments.

Note that this high status given to feelings is a significant characteristic of reflection. It helps to distinguish the process from observation, where 'the skill is to record accurately without drawing any conclusions as to how the child is feeling or why the behaviour took place' (Hamer 2000).

Usually one of the reasons behind your reflection will be to repeat a positive experience and avoid a negative one. Describing your own feelings requires you to say exactly how you felt. You might use expressions like

- happy
- pleased with myself
- really thrilled
- frustrated
- let down
- disappointed
- puzzled
- surprised.



This is plain language that you would use in everyday conversation. Such expressions and many others will pass through your mind during the day. You need to record these feelings so that you can consider what an event meant to you.

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### Example

*You read a story to a group of 15 children aged two to four years. When the children sat quietly, ready for the story, you were **satisfied** that you had used your skills to settle the group. At the start of the story, you were **frustrated** to have to stop reading to arrange the seating so that everyone could see. When a two-year-old screamed, you were **annoyed** because it disrupted the flow of the story. When no one listened at the end of the story, you were **confused** because they had shown interest in the story and had enjoyed it at other times.*

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### Reflection

*Consider a group activity in which you were involved recently. How did you feel about that event? Try to think of both your positive and negative feelings. Keep this event in mind as you read on.*

## Honest recording

Your description of a situation and your feelings about it forms the base on which to begin your reflection. It is therefore important that you are honest when you describe your feelings. The more honest you are, the more you will learn. Thinking back later on your group activity, you might be embarrassed at your strong emotions at the time over an event that now seems trivial. That is all the more reason for recording these emotions because they were a significant influence on the event.

All educators, even those with years of experience, face situations that are difficult for them. You won't be considered incompetent just because a teaching session has gone wrong. It happens to everyone some of the time; to beginning educators it happens *much of the time*.

As with any skill you will ever acquire, you learn through mistakes. By reflecting honestly on these mistakes, you are taking action to ensure they will not occur in the same way again. One of the advantages of reflective practice is that your mistakes themselves are an important part of your learning.

Just as it is important to be honest about your negative feelings and mistakes, it is important to acknowledge positive feelings and actions. A positive event too provides a great opportunity for learning and positive feelings may have led to some of the actions that contributed to the event. Record these feelings and your resulting actions so that you can consider why you had those feelings and in this way begin the process of change.

## Investigating your values and beliefs

Now you have described your feelings, you need to find out why you felt that way. Don't just dismiss the experience with a one-off sentence, such as: 'Because it didn't go well, I felt bad.' Instead, look more closely and consider other factors that could have contributed to the way you felt.

### Reflection

*Look back at your description from the previous reflection where you recalled the feelings you had during your group activity. Do the feelings you described explain all that you felt about the group time? Is there more that you need to say about the event?*

Many of your feelings about an event will come from the immediate situation. They will also be influenced by your own values and beliefs.

Values are those aspects of living that you care about and are important to you. They give you a reason for doing things. As an educator, you hold many and varied values and beliefs about education, such as those in regard to how children should be taught and how they should respond. You develop them through your own experiences, your observations of others and your studies. Your own values and beliefs and those of others affect what you do.

### Example

*If you think that sitting and listening is an important skill, you will favour group and mat times. If you believe that children's learning is best fostered in spontaneous free play, you will hold fewer group times.*

When you begin your teacher training programme, you already have values developed in other areas of your life. You are likely to uphold the values of educators you had good relationships with; conversely, you try to exclude from your teaching the characteristics of educators with whom you had more difficulty relating. Your values are then influenced further by the theories you learn and your observation of the practices of other educators.



## How to recognise your values and beliefs

In reflective practice, you consider the impact that your values and beliefs have on you as an educator. To recognise your values and beliefs, ask yourself the following:

- What is important to me as an early childhood educator?
- What do I believe is essential for children's learning and care?
- What do I believe about a parent's role in early childhood education?

Through answering these questions, it should be fairly easy to compile a list of 10 or more values and beliefs. More challenging is to say *why* you consider them to be important. However, it will be helpful for you to find the words to justify them now so that you can articulate them to others later.

Another way of recognising your values is by reflecting on situations about which you have felt comfortable or uncomfortable and asking yourself why you felt that way. If you felt uncomfortable, it is likely that your values were compromised, as they were in conflict with what you had to do as an educator.

Where a practice compromises your values, you may need to consider changes to the situation and/or to yourself. If the conflict concerns a situation you can change, you could ask your supervisor, for example, if staff could discuss the issue at the next meeting. On the other hand, your value may conflict with a regulation or another set requirement of early childhood education, such as regulations on child-to-staff ratios. In this case, you should look closely at your own value, consider why it is important to you and reflect on ways that you can incorporate your values along with the requirements. This process can help you to find compromises when you are unable to change the situation itself.

Now that you have started to identify your own values and beliefs, you can extend this awareness by reflecting on particular aspects of early childhood practices that you value.



### Reflection

*Think about your own values in relation to a specific aspect of early childhood education, such as the provision of group times. Which of your values about children's learning are upheld and which may be compromised by these practices?*

## Moving towards self-awareness

By reviewing your professional beliefs and values, you take the first step towards greater self-awareness as you begin to understand why you act as you do in your role of educator. You can develop self-awareness further by looking at your assumptions about people, events, places and things. Assumptions are beliefs that you take for granted, that seem so obvious that you don't have to state or explain them.



### Example

*An assumption held by most early childhood educators is that children under five develop dispositions and learn skills and concepts that form the base for future learning and development. This idea seems so obvious to educators that few would even verbalise it. However, not everyone holds this assumption. Many parents with children about to start school will say of their child: 'She is ready to learn now.' This type of statement suggests that these parents perceive knowledge and learning as the development of the 'Three Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic) that often begins in the school setting.*

By definition, assumptions are hard to recognise. They are often a part of the fabric of your life and the lives of other people that you are close to. To become sufficiently aware of yourself as a professional, it is important to examine what assumptions you hold about children and early childhood education.

### Reflection

*Reflect on your assumptions about early childhood education. What aspects of your role as a teacher do you 'just know'?*

As Stephen Brookfield – an adult educationalist who writes extensively in the field of developing critical thinking – points out, our assumptions as educators come from our own life experiences, including our experiences in education. For example, your beliefs about managing children's behaviour are likely to be based on how your behaviour was managed at home and in education settings. Identifying your assumptions about children's behaviour will help you to understand your expectations of children in relation to the expectations of other educators.

## Cultural awareness

Often too our assumptions are based on how we conduct our lives and on the belief that others live in similar ways. A sociocultural perspective on learning and development embraces the cultural contexts of learning, recognising the importance of culture in children's experience. *Te Whāriki* is a bicultural curriculum that acknowledges the values and aspirations of both major cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand and supports educators to develop a bicultural approach to their teaching.

To recognise and acknowledge cultural differences, you need to understand your own culture. You must identify your own cultural assumptions so that you can recognise assumptions in other cultures. Knowing more about your own and other cultures will also help you to consider different perspectives more effectively. You will be less likely to take a deficit view about the reasons for events (that is, an event occurred because some element was missing). You will feel more comfortable about challenging your own and others' assumptions.



### Reflection

*The use of the eyes in interpersonal encounter is a fruitful field for misunderstanding. Pakeha children are explicitly instructed to "look at" anyone they are talking to and to look superiors in particular "in the eye". Looking at people signals interest and*

undivided attention. It also indicates you have nothing to hide. To let your gaze wander from a vis-a-vis is interpreted as boredom and (worse) bad manners for letting it show. To look away from a questioner is a sign of evasion or guilt. Maoris and Samoans on the other hand consider it actually impolite to look directly at others when talking to them. They say that it tends to put the two concerned into a relation of opposition, encouraging the development of conflict and confrontation. It also tends to cut out the others in the group. So they rest their gaze elsewhere, slightly to one side, on the floor, ceiling or distant horizon, or they even close their eyes altogether. In this way they soften whatever is said, and make it easier to concentrate on the content. Unfortunately behaviour intended to avoid offence is often "read" by Pakehas with other ideas as rudeness.' (Metge and Kinloch 1984)

## Awareness of the impact of your assumptions

Your assumptions are a significant context to consider in reflecting on individual events. You can examine them by justifying each aspect of an event or situation to yourself.

### Example

*You will have a number of assumptions about what it means to be a 'good' parent or caregiver. You regard particular behaviours as evidence that a parent or caregiver is 'good'. If you see a parent behaving in a way that doesn't fit into your set of 'good' parent assumptions, you could decide that they are not a good parent - without thinking, reflecting or even noticing yourself doing it. Once you have made this assumption about someone, you might interpret other behaviours as further signs that he or she is not a good parent.*

As the above example illustrates, your assumptions can lead you to make judgements and decisions that are not based on observation and good information. In such cases, your assumptions do not contribute to positive learning for children and they are not helpful in your own learning and development. Reflective practice helps you to catch your own assumptions and explore them rather than take them for granted.

### Reflection

*Think about an activity area in your early childhood setting. Describe the activity and justify its inclusion in the programme. Ask another teacher to do the same. Ask a parent what they can tell you about that activity. Consider how the three answers differ. What do they show about the differences in assumptions? Reflect on the reasons for these differences.*



## Awareness of what you know and what you need to know

The information you bring from personal experience and from training programmes will contribute greatly to your learning. You expand your self-awareness by realising the true value of this knowledge to your professional teaching. Reflection can help you to determine the value of what you already know.

Moreover, reflection can draw your attention to a need for further learning. To try to answer the question of 'Why did this situation occur?', you draw on your existing knowledge. If you are unable to find a satisfactory answer, you realise that you need to learn more about this area. Once you have extended your knowledge, you can reflect further on the situation. It is at this point that your new knowledge may challenge your values and assumptions, leading you to revise what you believed originally.

## Gathering theoretical knowledge

The development of theoretical knowledge begins with your first teacher-training course and continues throughout your career. In the context of ongoing research and social changes, new theories and practices are always being developed to explain and support learning and development in early childhood. Educators have to integrate new knowledge into their practice continuously. One way to achieve this integration is to reflect on how a new theory relates to your practice.

Theory can be defined as 'the proven thoughts of others that help to explain reality'. After examining an aspect of child development or early childhood practice, a researcher develops a theory to explain the reality as he or she observed it. The resulting theory is then shared with others to support and develop their understanding. However, the process may not be comfortable as new theories often challenge many of our existing beliefs, values and assumptions.

### Example

*Those who trained in early childhood prior to the 1990s are likely to have developed their values and beliefs as teachers based on a Piagetian perspective. Yet, as discussed in chapter 2, Te Whāriki introduced Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective on learning and development, challenging Piagetian theory. Many educators experienced personal and professional conflict as they adapted their teaching approaches to incorporate the new theory.*

Reflecting on your practice helps to explain why your current beliefs about early childhood education conflict with new theories. More positively, it is a tool for finding solutions to difficulties that may result from such conflict.

Theoretical knowledge can help explain an event. Think back to the example of an educator's feelings about a group time, which included feelings of annoyance when a two-year-old screamed ('Identifying your feelings' above). Using theoretical

knowledge, you could explain the difficulties with the two-year-old by citing development theory on children's concentration spans. A 20-minute group time was too long for children in this age group. Perhaps this aspect is so obvious that you would cover it in recording your assumptions. However, you can also use theoretical knowledge to justify your assumptions clearly.

Equally, theoretical knowledge can challenge our values and assumptions. As you learn of new theories and perspectives on working with infants, toddlers and young children, you should include that new information in your reflections. Through reflection you can also find out how theory relates to practice.

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### Example

*Many early childhood settings now include computers as an integral part of their programmes for children. You believe that computers are not appropriate resources to include in an early childhood education programme. You then read an article by Susan Haugland that indicates that computers do support children's learning if appropriate software is used. You can reflect on the advantages discussed by Haugland, and on your values and assumptions in relation to this theory. If the theory challenges your previous beliefs, you may change both your values and the programme you present. By reflecting on your practice using theoretical knowledge, you have improved your practice.*

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### Reflection

*Find the most recent **Education Gazette** or **Pito Pito Kōrero** (received by all early childhood settings). Choose one article that relates to your context and reflect on how the theoretical perspective of its author impacts on your current practices.*

## Having reflective conversations

In a reflective conversation, you discuss a situation with a colleague or tutor/lecturer. With this other person, you explore the events and theories that affect your practice. In this way you gain another perspective of your teaching, another person's insights into a situation. It is an opportunity for you to ask questions and find answers to issues that are puzzling you.

In a typical reflective conversation, you will find a person with whom you feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings, and who in return can share openly with you. Your conversation could begin with questions that do not specifically highlight your actions, such as the following:

- Why do you think this event occurred in this way?
- What could have been done differently?
- What other factors contributed to the situation?

After you have become comfortable with this process, you can personalise the questions in these ways:

- What did I do to contribute to this situation?
- What should I do differently next time?
- Was my practice as an educator appropriate?

To find out more about your teaching practice in a given situation, ask a colleague to observe you. The resulting feedback will provide valuable information for a reflective conversation and contribute to your professional development.

A colleague's view of an event may be quite different to your own. His or her perspective may lead you to question your viewpoint. Or your colleague might share your beliefs, affirming what you feel about a situation. Whether you agree or disagree with your colleague, a reflective conversation can help you to identify your theoretical knowledge and beliefs and the impact they have on your practice as a teacher.

You will already be having informal reflective conversations with your colleagues. Many of them will arise when you are working with children and comment to a colleague on something that you have noticed.



#### **Example: an informal reflective conversation**

*You comment to your colleague: 'When the water trough was on the grass, children played there most of the time. Now that the trough is on the concrete, few play there. I've noticed that the children in the carts go very close to the children playing at the trough, which may make it unpleasant to play there. What do you think?'*

#### **Example: an informal reflective conversation at a more theoretical level**

*You reflect on how you can promote literacy in your setting. You have read recently that children must have the opportunity to contribute their understandings and develop meaning from the story with an expert reader. You wonder how to create the opportunities for children to develop meaning when you are reading to a small group.*

*So you ask a colleague what she thinks about participatory reading. You discuss the pros and cons of this approach in your setting. Perhaps you have too many children at story time for it to be practicable. Or maybe you don't feel comfortable with the approach because it can interrupt the flow of a story. The outcome of the conversation is that you acknowledge the need to consider this idea further.*

With your experience of these kinds of informal reflective conversations, you have a base from which to develop a more formal approach. For example, you might take the following steps to develop a formal reflective conversation about participatory reading:

- Ask a colleague about his or her views on participatory reading. Share your understandings from your own research. Discuss how this technique can be incorporated into the programme.
- Ask your colleague to observe you reading to children to see how you encourage their participation.
- Discuss the outcome of this observation. Perhaps you have been implementing the principles of participatory reading without realising you were contributing to literacy so effectively.
- With your colleague, discuss how to develop your practice or change the programme to include more opportunities for participatory reading.

Thus the formal reflective conversation has established a foundation for the conversation and proceeds through to a formal course of action. The discussion has enabled you and your colleague to develop both your knowledge and practice in a positive way.

## **Changing your thinking and practice**

As highlighted in the above discussion, when you reflect on your practice you consider your values, beliefs and assumptions and how they may impact on your practice. In addition, you consider what you could do differently next time. Reflection leads you to change the way you think about different aspects of your practice as an educator.

The process of change usually begins when your existing beliefs and values conflict with an event and/or new information that you have received. Developing new ways of thinking is a challenge as you leave behind old, often secure beliefs, and take on new ones, which may not feel as comfortable initially. Changing also requires more time and energy than maintaining the status quo does.

Yet in meeting the challenge of changing your thinking, you gain new skills for teaching and your practice becomes more fulfilling as you realise you are providing more appropriate learning opportunities for children. You overcome some of the difficult moments you have experienced as an educator and find more areas of your practice about which you feel positive and comfortable.

Implementing changes to your practice as a result of reflection requires thought and planning. You must consider how the change in one area of your practice will impact on other areas.

### Example

*From your reflection and conversation on participatory reading, you have identified the need to work with smaller groups of children so that they have opportunities to develop meaning through contributing their understandings in the book reading session. This change will impact on the programme in the setting, as further changes are required to allow you to work with these smaller groups. What will happen with the children who would normally be part of a larger group? Will the overall literacy programme be affected? All such implications need to be planned for to ensure that the change you implement in your practice will fit in with the broader context of the setting. Planning for change at this level must involve the team.*



Many reflections initiate changes to your own actions that do not require a corresponding change from your colleagues or the programme. For example, a reflection may lead you to change the way you interact with children and colleagues. In such cases, you still need to plan how you will implement the change. The starting point for the plan is to develop a goal that identifies the change you wish to achieve.

### Example

*After reflecting on a series of events in which children have not followed your directions, you find that you need to provide clear explanations with any requests that you give children. Your plan to implement this change in your practice begins with the following goal, and then develops as you identify ways to work towards it.*

#### **Goal: to ensure children understand the reason for the directions I give**

- *I will identify why I want children to follow this direction.*
- *I will frame the direction in a way that gives them a positive alternative.*
- *I will say why I want them to follow the direction. For example: 'John, please put the sand beside the hole you are digging. Throwing the sand might hurt the other children.'*

*I will follow this pattern for one week, then evaluate how it is working and make necessary changes.*

As the example above shows, by developing a plan of how you will proceed, you establish clear strategies and a goal that you can use to measure how effective the change has been.

## Asking reflective questions

Note that reflection can begin with either

- a description of an event or current practice, as discussed earlier in this chapter, or
- a question.

As with many other reflective skills, you can use questions to link theory to your practice. The reflective questions in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996b), *Quality in Action* (Ministry of Education 1998a) and other texts show how such links might be made, as in the following examples:

- What problem-solving activities support children to co-operate and support each other? (Contribution Goal 3, Ministry of Education 1996b, p70)
- What strategies do we use when infants, toddlers and young children are not confident about participating in the experiences that challenge them? (Ministry of Education 1998a, p36)

Such questions encourage you to observe and gather information from your own teaching to support your reflection. Chapter 7 provides guidance on using these kinds of questions.

## Progressing with your reflective skills



An educator new to reflecting on practice often reflects by applying techniques and rules to his or her description of an event, as these aspects of practice are tangible, objective and clear. From considering how the general rules impact on a specific situation, the educator progresses to analysing what occurred in individual events.

This progression may not appear clear to you as your reflective skills develop. But you will find that with experience your reflections become more focused on particular events and on how you can develop your practice in relation to what occurred. As you work through the following chapters, you will develop an understanding of how you can

progress your skills to this third stage of reflection.

Reflective skills cannot be mastered completely at the beginning of teacher training. Instead they develop along with your professional experience and knowledge. They become part of your ongoing professional growth and development that will result in effective learning programmes for children.

## Summary

This chapter has introduced the reflective skills of

- describing your practice – recounting a particular event with all relevant details about the adults and children present, interactions and the environment
- identifying your feelings – recounting how you reacted emotionally to an event, so that you can explore how the event affected you
- investigating your values – recognising those aspects of living that are important to you so that you can understand how they influenced the event
- moving towards self-awareness – recognising your assumptions and identifying their impact on your practice, understanding your own culture, valuing what you know and recognising your needs for further learning
- gathering theoretical knowledge – integrating new knowledge into your practice, even though it may challenge your thinking, and using theory to help explain an event
- having reflective conversations – exploring the events and theories that affect your practice with a colleague or tutor/lecturer
- changing your thinking and practice – developing new ways of thinking about different aspects of your practice and planning carefully for the changes you will make to your practice
- asking reflective questions – using questions (such as those in curriculum documents and other texts) to begin your reflection and link theory to your practice.

These reflective skills develop as you gain experience in applying them and broaden your professional experience and knowledge.