**Chapter Seven**

**The Critically Reflective and Creative Practitioner**

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By the end of this chapter you will

* Understand what critical reflection is and what it means for you.
* Have considered the role of creative thinking and problem solving in critical reflection.
* Have explored some theories and strategies to help you critically reflect upon your practice with young children, both personally and collaboratively.
* Understand the barriers to critical reflection.

**Introduction**

Critical reflection is now an expected practice in many areas of professional life and in a time of great social and political change, is ever more urgent and necessary. But critical reflection is not always valued by students as it is a complex concept and it is not always clear to students how the process can support practice. This chapter will aim to explain what critical reflection is, and how it can be applied to empower students and enable them to question habitual practice and contest some of the dominant discourses within early childhood.

**What is critical reflection?**

Critical reflection is a difficult concept and is not easy to pin down, this is because it is used and applied by professionals working in diverse fields, such as health, education, and social work so how it is defined and interpreted differs according to professional context. (Fook, Collington, Ross, Rusch and West, 2016) The fact that it is used in other professional contexts should reassure us that it is useful, worthwhile and important for early childhood professionals. The professions that utilise critical reflection are ones that deal with people, where relationships and ethical judgements are required, but where these are not always simplistic. Fook et al (2016) suggest that critical reflection can empower and contribute to increased professional identities, as well as support us to accept change. In some cases critical reflection can lead to personal transformative change as we are able to better understand who we are as humans and where our values are located. It involves questioning values and assumptions, beliefs, political views and theoretical approaches that steer our decision making and our practice. It also requires us to look beyond the literal to question the historical, social, political and ethical context that defines practice within the field of early childhood. Brookfield (in Fook et al 2016; 11) defines critical reflection as,

‘the uncovering of power and hegemony. I regard the critical dimension of reflection to be drawn from critical theory’s concern to demonstrate how ideological manipulation can forces us to behave in ways that seem to make sense, but that actually keep up powerless’

He further asserts that one can practise reflectively without questioning the power dynamics or the frames of reference of the wider field within which one is located. For reflection to be critical then, ‘it must have as its explicit focus the uncovering and challenging of power dynamics that frame our decisions and actions’ (Brookfield in Fook et al 2016; 13). Mac Naughton (2005:7) has previously asserted that critical reflection diverts attention from the individual and onto power relationships between people. Locating where power is situated allows us to analyse our role within ‘oppressive and inequitable power relationships’. Goodson (*in* Bolton, 2014:11) elaborates further suggesting that ‘Reflective practice is located in the political and social structures which increasingly hedge professionals’. Oates (in O’Grady & Cottle, 2016:154) agrees and asserts that critical reflection ‘should question the power relationships that allow or promote one set of practices over another’.

All of these authors agree that critical reflection is about identifying how power influences what we do as professionals and questioning it, this involves scrutiny of how social and political structures legitimise certain practices. Brookfield’s example suggests that as professionals we can be manipulated into behaving in ways that we do not agree with or feel uncomfortable about but are powerless to change. An example from practice may help elaborate.

While employed for the day as a supply teacher with a reception class, it was Asha’s role to supervise the children in an outside play session in a cordoned off section of the playground accompanied by the permanent teaching assistant. It was clear that the space had been organised with a range of ‘play’ activities designed to support the recognition of shapes, (which could be labelled ‘playful learning activities’.) One of the activities required the children to jump along a ‘path’ of shapes laid on the ground and to name each shape as they jumped. The children however had been told by Asha they were going outside to play, so they ran about in the space, and threw the shapes to each other following their own play agendas. The children were met with reprimands by the teaching assistant and an elaborate set of instructions to Asha as to how the children should be ‘playing’. As a supply teacher, Asha felt very uncomfortable about this situation, as she recognised that the children’s expectations of ‘play’ and her expectations did not align with the activities she was expected to carry out. Asha decided to carry out the activities in the way that had been planned by the teacher, but also incorporated some of the children’s own play agendas by throwing the shapes to children and calling out the names of each. She also allowed the children some free play time where they could make their own decisions about how to play with the shapes.

Activity: power in the practice setting

* Have you ever been in a professional context where you felt uncomfortable about what you were being asked to do, but were powerless to change it?
* How did you act in this circumstance and how did it make you feel?
* How was the action /practice justified? Where or with whom was the power located?

In this example the power lay with the teacher’s planning (based on curriculum guidelines) and to some degree the teaching assistant, but also with Asha as the teacher in authority at the time. Asha had to make her own decisions about the choices she made within this circumstance and accept responsibility for her actions. It may have been useful for the staff in this setting to critically reflect on the practice here. This might involve how the staff within the setting conceptualise play and its role within their practice and how this aligns with children’s conceptions of play. As a student volunteer it is more difficult to change or challenge practice that makes you feel uncomfortable as you are not in a position of authority but using critical reflection may help you to identify ways to question habitual practice and challenge your own and others’ assumptions. It may also help you to view events from more than one perspective and help you to articulate and justify your own practice and decision making. This requires stepping back from events and trying to locate our own values and assumptions and thinking deeply about how we position ourselves within pedagogy.

Brockbank & McGill 2004 (in Bolton, 2014) consider two levels of reflection which they call single loop and double loop reflection. Single loop reflection:

* Examines an event and seeks more effective strategies
* It asks the questions- What? So what? Now What?
* Develops awareness and more appropriate actions within practice - but professional structures unchallenged

Double loop reflection is a deeper type of reflection which includes critical thinking about one’s actions (reflection & reflexivity)

* Asks ‘why’ questions
* Challenges own values and the organisation’s values, norms, principles, theories -in-use
* Can result in more questions and uncertainty (Bolton, 2014:47)

Double loop reflection asks us to be more critical and requires reflexivity. Bassot (2013) describes reflexivity below;

*‘*Reflexivityrefers to the high level of self-awareness needed to practice in an anti-discriminatory way. It involves becoming aware of our values and assumptions which are culturally situated’ (Bassot, 2013:67).

Our values, attitudes and assumptions develop as a part of the socialisation process and are influenced by our background, economic status, location, family, religion, wider beliefs and lived experiences. Reflexivity encourages us to think deeply about how our attitudes and values have been formed and to recognise that our own ways of thinking may obscure or impinge upon the views of others. Recognising how we see the world and what has influenced us can offer new possibilities for seeing the world differently.

Being reflexive allows us to:

* Question attitudes, theories, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions
* Practice responsible and ethical action
* Understand our roles/professional status in more depth
* Examine how our own behaviour and that of others is shaped by organisational structures and identify who is marginalised
* Ask critical questions (rather than accepting or reacting)

Activity: questioning assumptions

Can you identify an event in your personal or professional life where you questioned your own assumptions?

* How did this make you feel?
* Did this event lead you to change your actions?
* Did this event lead you to change your views/values?
* Now identify an event where you questioned the assumptions of an organisation and ask the same questions

**Locating power in practice – some critical theories and concepts**

Brookfield (in Fook et al 2016:16) describes how critical theory describes

 ‘the process by which people learn to recognize how unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices. These ideologies shape behaviour and keep an unequal system intact, by making it appear normal’

The ideas of Foucault, a French sociologist, can be useful to help us see where dominant ideologies are embedded and identify where power is located within early childhood, through the concept of *discourse* (Moss, 2019). Discourse is used to describe language used in interaction with others, but can also refer to a body of knowledge, concepts and ideas that describe and construct knowledge within a particular subject; for example, ‘gender discourse’ or ‘early childhood discourse.’ Some ideas within the discourse are valued and legitimized through various means including policy and legislation, to produce *dominant discourses* that are taken for granted, legitimised and often unquestioned; these dominant discourses Foucault called ‘regimes of truth’. (Moss, 2019p.5) Deconstructing dominant discourses allows us to consider the historical, political and moral positions embedded within these dominant ideas and to consider other ways of seeing the world (White et al 2006). Walker (1988), further elaborates and makes links to critical reflection.

‘Discourses (forms of thought and knowledge which may be for example theories or political ideas) are reproduced within discourse (talk)’……. Critical reflection at this level is about understanding the technologies of power, language and practice that produce and legitimate forms of moral and political regulation.’ Walker 1988 (cited in White et al 2006:10)

The concept of ‘school readiness’ provides an example to illustrate these ideas within England currently. ‘School readiness’ suggests that children should arrive at formal settings with specific skills, abilities and attitudes, implying children should start school *in the same place*. The ‘fixed and static aims’ linked with school readiness are problematic (Evans, 2015) and unrealistic as they do not acknowledge the diversity of children’s unique lives and lived experiences. Evans (2015) further suggests that identification against fixed aims can therefore position children on a predefined spectrum of ‘un/readiness’, a positioning  that can affect their educational experiences from the very earliest days’. (Pg 34.) Social inequalities, poverty, location, cultural diversity and access to services within children’s lives all work to produce complex, diverse and different childhoods which require formal institutions to accept and expect difference not ‘sameness’. The idea of school readiness (or the lack of it) can feed into further discourses about deficit parenting which ignore broader influencing factors. Wyness (2018: 302) makes a similar point, suggesting that ‘policy and professional practice realms tend to favour individualised explanations for school failure, rather than broader underlying social class inequalities.’  What is also important to consider is the idea that ‘school readiness’ is a shifting concept, meaning it can be interpreted and defined differently according to time, place and culture, demonstrating that it is a socially constructed idea. Social constructionism provides a useful ‘lens’ through which to deconstruct assumed ‘truths’ and dominant discourses which govern action and practice within early childhood.

Alanen (2015) provides a useful description,

‘Social constructionism suggests that changes do not occur as a result of biological or natural processes; instead, it is a result of the differing ways in which meanings are constructed and reconstructed through people’s histories as they interact with each other, in their experiencing the world and in their making sense of the world. The social constructionist sees these primarily as the product of social and cultural processes’. Alanen (2015: 150)

Social constructionism therefore asks us to consider how concepts and practices that make sense or seem natural, (like our example of ‘school readiness’ earlier) are actually socially constructed ideas that can be deconstructed, therefore, social action can be rearranged in different ways. Social constructionism is linked to postmodernist ideas, postmodernism contests ideas of ‘scientific reasoning’ and recognises that knowledge and truth are not fixed but continually changing. Postmodernism suggests that science reproduces inequality and benefits dominant groups as some truths are more powerful, legitimised through institutions or politics.

Looking at the diversity of practice in other countries and cultures can help us to understand ideas that are socially and culturally constructed and help us to consider how we might do things differently. In her useful book, Childhood with Bourdieu, Alanen (2015) illustrates how we can critically analyse early childhood practice through the application of Bourdieu’s theories and key concepts. Bourdieu’ key concepts include:

* Field – *This describes a space /place which is controlled by its own set of rules, logic and concepts which are specific to that field. For example, the Arts or Education*.
* Habitus- *This describes the way that society reproduces itself through, learned attitudes, values, ways of acting which are internalised by individuals through their experiences and position within society.*
* Capital – Is linked to Marxist ideas of capital as economic power, therefore the more economic capital the more power one has. This can be found in three ways, economic capital, *which describes economic power*,cultural capital -*which describes cultural attitudes, values and affordances,* andsocial capital *– which describes the network of social relationships and links with others*

(further detail about Bourdieu’s ideas can be found in Alanen, 2015

Considering how these concepts apply to early childhood can help us to deconstruct some of the dominant discourses that are embedded within early childhood practice. For example, recently there has been a strong political agenda within the UK and other countries for international comparison and attempts to universalise early childhood approaches. Urban et al. (2019) is critical of these attempts and identifies that practice globally is still dominated by

* A deficit approach to children and families- *these ideas can be linked to the concept of habitus as the responsibility for children’s differences /deficits are linked to parenting approaches, rather than structural inequalities such as access to services and resources*
* Predetermined models and outcomes against cultural and local appropriateness- *this can be linked to the concept of ‘field’ where curriculum frameworks and specific approaches are legitimised and imposed as part of the dominant discourse marginalising other ways of doing and being*
* Decontextualized approaches (Reggio Emilia, Forest Schools)
* Focus on narrowly defined early learning curricular especially numeracy & literacy
* A focus on ‘development’ linked to colonialist thinking
* Assumptions about effects of digital technologies and AI in the future

Activity: Bourdieusian concepts

Can you link the last of Urban’s points to any of Bourdieu’s concepts?

Reflect on your own experiences in a setting. Can you use any of Bourdieu’s idea to deconstruct your experiences?

**Feminist Poststructuralist Perspectives**

Feminist poststructuralist perspectives focus on how identity and subjectivity is learned through taking up gender discourses, including ideas, words, feelings, images and action through which we position ourselves in society. (Mac Naughton, 2008) Some gender discourses are more available than others due to power which is mediated (sometimes by force) by others , in families, through institutions , cultural context, popular media and artefacts. Dominant gender discourses influence the choices that are available to children in relation to their play, appearance, and the cultural toys and resources that are available to them. Consider how difficult it might be for a young child to act and behave in ways that contest dominant gender roles.

Activity: dominant discourses

* Have you ever been in a situation where you went against the dominant position within a group?
* How did this make you feel? How did the rest of the group behave towards you?
* Have you ever agreed with a dominant position because you wanted to ‘fit in’?

**Research Focus**

Barbie Girls and Xtracturs : Discourse and identity in virtual worlds for young children (Black, Korobkova, Epler, 2015). In this research study the authors consider how ‘Barbie Girls and Xtractaurs’ online games afford and constrain different types of play for children. Within their study they identify that children are not passive consumers of the games and artefacts they have access to and make up their own play narratives based on such games. However they demonstrate that games and artefacts provide interwoven narratives and layers of meaning , including explicit and subtle messages about childhood, gender and sexuality . The possibilities and identities available within the construction of avatars in the barbie girls game focussed mainly on physical appearance , such as hairstyles, makeup, clothes and the activities available were mainly shopping experiences. The Xtracturs game however, provided more creative opportunities to construct new species of dinosaur and was set within the context of a science lab, locating the action within a legitimate employment role. One has to question what opportunities and possibilities each game afforded the children who played them; although each game was available to both sexes each were explicitly targeted at each sex. Black et al (2015) conclude that *‘cultural artefacts are not innocent and carry with them demarcations of class, culture and gender*.’ (Black et al 2015: 267) Feminist poststructuralist approaches therefore, help us to uncover ways in which gender is constructed for and by children and allow us to identify inequalities. This is clearly very important for early childhood professionals.

**Critical race theory and postcolonialism**

Critical race theorists see racial categories as socially constructed produced by social relationships and culture through institutions such as the law, politics and religion (Social theory rewired, 2019) Critical race theory therefore challenges racism within education, and the curriculum which has been historically constructed based on dominant ‘western’ or colonial ideas. Within critical race theory educators are seen as social reconstructors or change agents who practice in an anti -discriminatory way by challenging all forms of systematic oppression . This oppression is often institutionalised and not overt. The concept of institutionalised racism describes how institutions such as education, or the police for example, contain subtle forms of oppression and inequality that are part of the overall system. Recent statistics which show that ‘Black Caribbean pupils were permanently excluded at nearly 3 times the rate of White British pupils’ (Gov.UK 2018) should cause us concern and make us question the reasons for this situation. ‘*Critical educators therefore build curriculum content by questioning what they are doing and why, reflecting critically on the values in their curriculum and looking for any unintended bias in their work with young children*. ‘ MacNaughton (2008:196) Although Mac Naughton was writing more than two decades ago these recent figures demonstrate that we should not be complacent and should continually be critically reflecting on our practice, and policies within institutions.

**The role of creativity in critical reflection**

It may not be immediately apparent how creativity is linked to critical reflection, however, creativity is inextricably linked with critical thinking. According to Robinson (2001 cited in Wilson, 2015:15)

‘It is no longer merely sufficient to have excellence in depth and grasp of knowledge. Critical to surviving and thriving is, instead creativity. For it is creativity which enables a person to identify appropriate problems and to solve them. It is creativity that identifies possibilities and opportunities that may not have been noticed by others’.

Robinson implies here that accumulating knowledge and information will not prepare the future practitioner for the complexity of decision making required within practice. If practice was technical instead of relational, we would be able to learn simplistic formulas for action that could be replicated in all cases. However, our practice is relational and as such involves complex encounters with unique individuals with shifting identities and in multiple contexts. It follows that decision making involves ethics and judgement based on our values and principles. Creativity according to the late Anna Craft (2002) encompasses ‘possibility thinking’ which assumes multiple possibilities and courses of action to solve problems rather than one singular way. Possibility thinking requires us to ask ‘what if’ questions and to imagine different solutions. This can be helpful in critical reflection as it is important to be able to acknowledge multiple realities and perspectives especially as ‘in professional work there are no absolutely right answers’ (Fook and Gardner, 2007 p6). Bolton (2014, p. 25 ) refers to the need for ‘serious playfulness’ as part of critical reflection, which involves the willingness to experiment, imagine, and embrace uncertainty which is a key feature of critical reflection. In order to reflect we have to be willing to let go of certainties, take risks and consider ‘what if’ and look for alternative explanations and viewpoints. This can lead to uncomfortable feelings of being out of control, but taking risks and asking ‘what if’ questions are precisely what can lead to new ways of seeing things. Bolton (2014: 4) also notes, ‘Schon, said the process of trial and error and learning from mistakes is artistry. The reliable map and accurate compass are reflection and reflexivity’. Thus critical reflection requires flexibility, embracing of uncertainty and a willingness to experiment.

Unfortunately, the current UK curriculum does not always embrace multiple possibilities and in some cases applies a ‘one size fits all’ approach to practice (exemplified within the synthetic phonics ‘fast and first’ approach to teaching reading). Similarly the strong focus on testing, assessment and comparison between children and formal settings, can lead to a competitive environment where questioning established practice is seen as ‘not conforming’. This can lead to constraints on practice and difficulties in adopting different approaches, however, it is important to deconstruct dominant discourses about practice where our professional integrity is compromised.

**Professionalism, autonomy and Agency**

Professionalism is interpreted in diverse ways depending on the organisational context as its meaning is fluid. Within early childhood, some have argued that the dominant construct of professionalism is the ‘worker as technician’ where practitioners work to meet narrowly defined and imposed outcomes in relation to an abstract construct of ‘quality’. (Garvey et al, cited in Bolton, 2014:11) Within this approach, there is little personal autonomy and practice is defined by legislative frameworks and measuring children’s capacity according to specific learning goals in relation to age and maturity. This approach can lead to ‘a tickbox culture of performativity’ (Osgood, 2012:51) and risks losing children as the key focus of our work in lieu of efficiency and meeting the targets of the organisation. Other commentators have argued that rather than empowerment, an aim to control is embedded within this construct of professionalism which serves to normalise ‘disciplinary and regulatory powers over teachers and children’ (Canella, 1997:137). In this environment then the role of critical reflection is crucial, as this allows us to reclaim our professional status and refocus our attention on the purpose of our work, children. Early childhood practice is underpinned by an ethics of care and values (Mc Dowall Clark and Murray, 2012) but these values do not always align with policy, curriculum or the wider goals of the organisation, and may force us into uncomfortable decisions. Bolton (2014:22) suggests, ‘Professional integrity can be defined as having values in practice as close to the same as espoused values as possible’. Espoused values describe the ethical values we hold as individuals, while values in practice describe the values we apply in our day to day practice. Bolton (2014) suggests that there is a tension between these, but critical reflection allows us to clarify our espoused values or alter our practice to align with those of the organisation; this may be uncomfortable, especially if our espoused values do not align with the organisation. However, Moss (2019) reminds us that we have a choice in how to construct our professional identity, we can choose to follow the mainstream dominant discourse and feel comfortable with this approach, but it is important to recognise that there are alternative ways of seeing early childhood and there are other ways to construct a professional identity for which we have a choice. (Moss, 2019)

**Research Focus**

The UNCRC convention on the rights of the child contains 54 articles linked to rights which affect children and which align with the espoused values of early childhood professionals. When we scrutinise our practice however, these rights are not always implemented or are given lip service. An example of this is the right of the child to be involved in decisions which affect their lives, (article 12). (Unicef 2019) In some formal settings, school councils or other consultative processes may provide the child’s voice on limited issues, but children are rarely involved in the design of spaces provided for them, such as classrooms or play spaces which are generally designed according to adult agendas. Research conducted by Yates and Oates (2019) sought to elicit the views of children on their preferences for a play space which was to be upgraded by the local council. The play space was evaluated by early childhood students and children’s views were sought using images, drawing, discussion and democratic voting methods. The children’s views were presented to the council in the form of a report and the play space was upgraded to include more risky play features and challenging equipment and relocated to a wooded area to include the natural living resources such as trees, plants and animals.

Reflect

* Reflect upon how the settings you know include children’s views on decisions that affect their lives
* Do children have choices about the use of the spaces they inhabit in the setting and their movement within them?
* Do children have choices about the curriculum offered?
* How many opportunities can you think of where children have choices or control over their time and activities?

**Quality as a socially constructed concept.**

Quality is a term commonly used in discussions around early childhood practice, within policy documents and initiatives, and is frequently utilised by politicians, however quality as a concept is not always interrogated. Quality in the business sector is associated with certainty and predictability – that which can be controlled and measured – hence words used to describe include output, management, measurement, assessment implying universality, linear progression and control. However pedagogy is a relational enterprise involving relationships, uncertainty and openness, it is therefore difficult to assess, measure and control quality in this context. As we have seen with the concept of ‘school readiness’ we need to acknowledge ‘quality’ as socially and culturally constructed, which means that it can be defined according to whoever holds the political power to define it. Urban (2015) describes quality as a *‘political project that implies and acknowledges a diversity of underlying values, interests and objectives’.* This means that professionals in early childhood have little control over what counts as quality, but are required to conform to the policies of the latest education minister, who may see change and reform of policy as a personal political project rather than in terms of the children and families lives that may be impacted. It is therefore extremely important that early childhood professionals hold government policy and new initiatives up to close scrutiny and do not accept change as always being for the better. Moss (2019:98 ) suggests a way to deconstruct ‘quality’

Why the use of certain words and concepts – for example, in the story of quality and high returns, words like’ quality’, ‘investment’, ‘returns’, ‘programmes’, ‘human capital’ etc.? The tellers of this story chose these terms rather than others, so what do these language choices tell us about how they see the world, young children and early education? What values and assumptions do they express? Who gains from the choice of language, and how does this work? What political choices have been made, albeit implicitly? What, in short, is going on here?

Within other cultural contexts education systems are based on different values and principles, which demonstrates the socially constructed nature of what counts as ‘quality’. Some examples of different ways of constructing early childhood policy which ‘contest the dominant ‘story of quality and high returns’ (Moss, 2019:65) include the following:

* Reggio Emilia (Italy) – community of inquiry, learning seen as co- contructed in relationship with others, based on detailed documentation of children’s meaning making through artistic and aesthetic explorations. (Moss, 2018)
* Te Wharkiri Curriculum – (New Zealand) founded on reciprocal relationships embedding indigenous knowledges and ways of learning. (Mac Naughton 2008)

**How can we engage in critical reflection personally and collaboratively?**

In order to practice critical reflection as a professional, it may be necessary to reflect personally and individually, but is usually more useful and effective if this is practiced with others. Either way, it can be helpful to use a model or construct to facilitate critical reflection, some of which have been referred to in previous chapters, others are also offered here.

**Individual Critical Reflection**

Individual critical reflection is now both expected and required in early childhood courses so using a diary or log can be helpful to note down significant events, critical incidents and experiences that we want to later question or consider for critical inquiry. In fact, the act of writing is in itself reflective, as it requires us to rethink our actions into words; choosing the words to describe and consider our actions forces us to think about them more deeply. We can see things more clearly when we look back at them and can often analyse our emotions and actions more objectively. Bolton (2014; 130) suggests,

‘Expressive and explorative writing develops confidence, co-operation and collaboration, enables challenging of assumptions about diversity, taken for granted unequal or unjust professional structures, encourages skill sharing, the development of team building, and enhances ability to deal with conflict in an artistic and aesthetic process’

Sometimes, incidents that may have appeared to be insignificant at the time, can gain greater significance when analysed afterwards. Using critical theories, concepts and models can help us to analyse our writing afterwards. Most theories and models identify different levels and stages of reflection but these generally include the following:

* a descriptive level – of the event in question
* a reflective level– thinking about the event
* a critical level- questioning the circumstance of the event and viewing this from different perspectives and viewpoints in relation to power relationships

 At the critical reflection level, theories and concepts like those described here and in earlier chapters, can help us to ‘deconstruct’ events, so we can see things more clearly and understand motivations, values, and assumptions behind our actions and locate power and oppression. This may then lead us to consider solutions to ensure more equitable practice. Schon describes practice as being ‘the swampy lowlands’ where there is little time to think clearly or step back from events (Bolton, 2014). While in the ‘swampy lowlands’ one has to make quick decisions and take action, *reflection in action*, often without knowing whether it is the best course of action. Critical reflection *on action*, allows us to look back at the event from a distance, to consider the context and the influencing factors to identify alternative courses of action. Del Barrio (2015) outlines a model called the ‘critical question ladder’ that may help us to deconstruct experiences and events within professional encounters with children, parents or other professionals. She outlines a number of questions we should ask ourselves of any encounter that we feel needs some critical interrogation.

* **Power**- Who holds power, are all voices heard? Who benefits? Who makes decisions? (policy)
* **Learning community** – How do we listen to each other? Respect/value/barriers?
* **Self/Other-** Where do my values come from, how does my role impact on others. How does the ‘other’ feel? What are their values? How can you support them?
* **Context**- What is involved, Who? Why? How?
* **Blame**- Who is blamed? Why?

Activity: the critical question ladder

* Identify an event from your reflective diary for interrogation
* Ask yourself the questions in the ‘critical question ladder’ and write down answers for each question
* Discuss with a critical friend how this process might lead to more equitable practice in future

**Collaborative Critical Reflection**

Critical reflection can be useful as an individual but can also be an isolating experience, critical reflection with others however, can offer many benefits. Working with others prevents constantly looking inwards, it develops understanding through offering different perspectives, and allows for creativity through implementing new ideas, thus preventing stagnation and habitual practice. (Bassott, 2015) This requires open, trusting, respectful relationships to exist within the team and a culture of acceptance and tolerance of diversity. If colleagues feel that their concerns will be interpreted as criticism, incompetence or lack of willingness to conform then little critical reflection can occur and practice will become ‘habitual’ with little change or growth. Critical reflection can happen very informally, with colleagues at the end of the day, but also formally within staff meetings, planning meetings, review meetings or development days. These meetings will require effective listening skills, and equal opportunities for all members of the team to speak and be heard. Reflexivity is important here, as individuals will need to be open to critical comment and be ready to re- evaluate their own ways of seeing. Bassott (2015) suggests that group critical reflection needs to be sensitively facilitated and identifies some important points for the facilitator’s role including;

* You are not an expert – the facilitator’s role is to enable discussion not to push your own agenda
* There needs to be an atmosphere of trust, so establishing ground rules may be useful initially but time is needed to establish trust and confidence.
* Active listening, using body language and eye contact is important
* You should be prepared for sensitive challenging
* Observe others body language and consider getting an observer for the group
* The location should be neutral if possible

Bassott (2015; 113) further identifies a Listen, Observe, Speak model for use within group reflections which ensures that all members of the group are heard, their views valued and taken seriously. Observation may give indications of how people are feeling, so it is important for the facilitator to be aware of this. Open questions are more useful than closed ones and using hypothetical questions or putting oneself into the position of others can be useful to understand their feelings. In group reflection we need to be ready to cope with emotions, as Bolton (2014:30) identifies, ‘Emotions are aroused when values are transgressed, opposed or affirmed. People from cultures and religions different from our own might well have very different and equally strong values’. Critical reflective practice therefore may bring emotions to the surface and these need to be handled sensitively and ethically. It is often critical incidents that arouse strong emotions in us that are the ones we need to analyse, but we may not at first be aware of why these emotions surface. Critical reflection can enable to us to identify emotions and how they are linked to the incident.

**Barriers to critical reflection**

So far this chapter has attempted to explain what critical reflection is, outlined some models and critical theory and explained how these can be applied to our professional lives and support us to scrutinise our professional practice. However, there are barriers to critical reflection at both the individual and the shared level and this section will consider some of these.

On an individual level, one of the key barriers to critical reflection is an acceptance that it is useful and meaningful. Thinking about what we do practically is sometimes seen as a ‘waste of time’, especially if there are established ways of doing things that appear to work and also as early childhood settings are extremely busy places. If individuals do not see the benefits or relevance of critical reflection for their professional practice, it is unlikely that they will practice it. In essence, one has to ‘buy into it’ and invest time in it. This brings us to the next barrier of time. When engaged in practice with young children in Schon’s ‘ swampy lowlands’ (Bolton, 2014:3) we are so embroiled in what we are doing that it is difficult to think clearly about the impact of our actions and decision making on others. He suggests then that we ‘reflect on action’ which necessarily means committing time to thinking about, (ideally, discussing with others) and analysing our practice reflectively and critically. For the individual student, this means making time within the day to do this. For this reason, early childhood courses and settings encourage the use of a reflective diary which ideally should be written as soon as possible after the events to capture as much detail as possible, the analysis of this can then happen at a later date. Other barriers to personal critical reflection are our own values and assumptions, which we may not be aware of. Reflexivity, being willing to question one’s own values and a willingness to accept other ways of seeing are necessary for critical reflection to be successful. Barriers within the organisation can also impact upon the effectiveness of critical reflection. Time limits and extremely busy schedules, as well as increased amounts of administration and paperwork can work against effective reflection opportunities. A lack of shared values can produce barriers to critical reflection, as critique can be interpreted as personal attack or lack of conformity. Sometimes, personality clashes can impact upon communication, but for critical reflection to be successful in groups , open, honest communication is essential. For these reasons, it is important for shared values to be established within teams, respecting diversity and difference. Similarly, as noted previously in the chapter, critical reflection needs to be carefully mediated by a facilitator who ensures that all are heard and listened to.

Reflect

Consider a setting you have spent time in:

* How did critical reflection happen in this setting?
* Reflect upon the opportunities to critically reflect within the team? Did this result in any changes to practice or policy?

**Summary**

This chapter has explored what critical reflection is and what it might mean for early childhood students. The role of creativity and critical thinking, being open to possibility and different ways of seeing the world underpin critical reflection and this may be difficult for those who are looking for certainty and fixed paths to follow. Engaging in critical reflection is a professional responsibility and can allow us to continually scrutinise our work, government policies and initiatives and retain our professional integrity in a complex and shifting landscape. We have explored some critical theories and concepts with which to enable critical reflection and to help us deconstruct our experiences. The role of reflective writing has been considered as a fruitful way to critically reflect individually and we have considered other ways to critically reflect collaboratively. While we have noted the barriers to critical reflection, we have acknowledged that critical reflection is a powerful way to take ownership of our practice and professional autonomy, leading to a strong workforce of change agents rather than passive technical workers.

**Word count 6161**

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[*https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568219839115*](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568219839115)