Critical reflection – Impact and implementation considerations in early childhood education and care

TEACH[R]

Debra Williams
Australian Christian Early Education, Bella Vista, NSW
debra.williams@hillsong.com

Peter Beamish
Avondale University, Cooranbong, NSW
peter.beamish@avondale.edu.au

> *a way of researching personal practice or experience to develop our under-standings of ourselves as knowers or makers of knowledge.*

Abstract

The National Quality Standard (NQS) is the benchmark for quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) within Australia. The Australian Government positioned reflective practice at the core of the NQS (ACECQA, 2013) in order to raise standards and inform future planning and decision making (COAG, 2009; Kennedy, 2011). Critical reflection was identified as foundational to good practice with educators expected to engage in a "lively culture of professional inquiry" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13) with reflection ensuring a way of continued improvement to raise standards.

This paper reports on a research study that explored the impact and implementation of critical reflection as part of the National Quality Standard (NQS) in ECEC. This research identified that critical reflection positively impacts ECEC operations and also positively impacts the learning environment of ECEC centres.

Introduction

The Australian Commonwealth Government introduced the NQS within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in order to raise standards (ACECQA, 2012) and inform future planning and decision making (COAG, 2009; Kennedy, 2011). Given the focus to engage in a "lively culture of professional inquiry" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 13), in such a way that educators "learn together, use collective knowledge, consider and

implement changes" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 7) and "engage in questions of philosophy, ethics and practice" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 13) there was obviously a need to understand how to go about the process of professional inquiry. This paper reports on a study of how one ECEC service used critical reflection to engage in a process of professional enquiry.

What is critical reflection?

ACECQA (2018) explains that through deconstructing experiences and critically examining each aspect of the practice, educators can gather a wealth of information to guide their decisions about what should be repeated, extended, or changed. In other words, critical reflection helps us learn by putting ourselves into an experience that forces us to draw on personal and theoretical knowledge to understand such experiences through different perspectives.

A synthesis of the literature suggests that in education, critically reflective practice is best described as a continuous process that involves educators assessing their practice and the impact of their values on children's learning and development. Critical reflection is thereby a process of identifying, analysing and questioning assumptions underlying the way an educator sees his/her practice, both individually and collectively, in order to develop understanding and knowledge to enhance practice (Williams, 2019). Fook (2002) defines critical reflection as "a way of researching personal practice or experience to develop our understandings of ourselves as knowers or makers of knowledge" (p. 444). Fook explains that understanding how ideas, beliefs and assumptions are partially determined by social contexts, enables educators to make specific

connections between themselves as individuals and the broader social, cultural, and structural environment. By using these processes and engaging in research, practice can be enhanced.

Critical reflection engages educators in thinking critically on the impact of their own background, assumptions, positioning, feelings, and behaviour whilst attending to the impact of the wider organisational, philosophical, and political context. Critical reflection provides a strategic alignment between ideology, knowledge, and practice so that when things are done, they are not done in a haphazard way. Critical reflection underpins practice because if ECEC educators understand what they are doing, and why, they can improve what they do.

The Present Study

This study sought to inquire into the impact and implementation of critical reflection as part of the assessment and ratings process within the National Quality Standard (NQS) in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The research study was set in one faith based licensed ECEC long day centre. The leader and four educators employed at the ECEC centre, were the participants and focus of the study. All participants were permanent employees with a minimum of a Diploma qualification and at least five years of experience. A qualitative research orientation was adopted because this type of inquiry "gives voice to the participants" (Cohen, et al., 2018, p. 288) and has the potential to provide rich descriptions of a phenomenon. As a case study, document analysis, observation, narrative, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data during an 18-month period in which ECEC staff were engaged in a critical reflective process.

Fook and Gardner's Approach to Critical Reflection

The ECEC centre in the study used a critical reflection approach developed by Fook and Gardner (2007) that focussed on improvements in professional practice (Fook, 2017). Through this critical reflective approach, personal and professional experience is deconstructed and analysed to understand different assumptions, relationships, and influences and how they affect practice. The 'incident' is then reconstructed to develop new understandings.

Fook and Gardner's (2007) approach "involves the unsettling and examination of hidden assumptions to rework ideas and professional actions" and has two stages. During the first stage, led by a facilitator, participants in a group are asked non-judgmental open style questions to gain information about a 'critical' incident being explored

and draw upon hidden assumptions and theories. Through this process, Fook and Gardner (2007) argue, the participant can make sense of feelings involved by uncovering assumptions and personal biases. In the second stage, the individual, with the support of the group, is helped to come to an awareness of deeper, hidden assumptions and review their learning from the first stage. This is achieved through the facilitator reflecting upon their assumptions and reasons for their thinking on their own learning from the first stage. By doing this, Fook argues, the participant who has presented and explored their 'critical' incident is now able to identify how their personal theory and practice might need to be adapted (Fook & Gardner, 2007). The new awareness created can be used to devise new approaches to practice.

The Findings

The Impact of Critical Reflection on ECEC Operations

The findings of the study demonstrate that critical reflection in ECEC as part of the NQS contributes to quality outcomes for ECEC. These positive findings demonstrate that ECEC is enhanced when critical reflection is done well. In particular, the study found the following benefits were associated with the use of critical reflection in ECEC.

1. Critical reflection builds authenticity
   As educators engage in critical reflection, they act in authentic ways involving reflection, interaction with colleagues, and sharing multiple perspectives. Through this process, they are perceived as being authentic by their colleagues. Critical reflection builds a community within the ECEC centre as participants collaborate together and are open and honest in expressing opinions with each other. The educators in the study reported that they benefited from being in a team that worked closely together. This created a better workplace environment, and enhanced well-being outcomes that in turn delivered better outcomes for children. These results are consistent with the literature (Ratelle et al., 2017) that suggests deep levels of reflection on professional behaviour result in behaviour change. Authenticity of context and understanding emerges through listening, observing and thinking about how theory is translated into practice (Watstein & Mitchell, 2014) and how practice informs theory. Critical reflection practices help educators to experience the genuine interest of colleagues and enables them to develop

Critical reflection builds community … as participants collaborate together and are open and honest in expressing opinions with each other.

> *Through questioning and testing theories in their practice, educators become empowered and encouraged to become researchers, to try new ideas and test theories.*

new understandings and a shared ethos.

2. Critical reflection facilitates collaboration
Educators who critically reflect, will work and learn together. They come together as learners, learn from one another, and form trusting and open professional and personal relationships as they collaborate to improve practice. Educators reported that engaging in critical reflection, increased the amount of collaboration between colleagues, which in turn built a sense of working together, and being on the same team, with all educators helping each other. This ultimately impacts the climate of the ECEC centre and is the type of ECEC environment that contributes to a high level of teacher wellbeing and better outcomes for the children in their care.

3. Critical reflection promotes real outcomes
In the present study, educators who engaged in critically reflection were more likely to achieve real outcomes, make a difference, and have an impact. Educators want to see action and real outcomes achieved through the process of critical reflection. When critically reflecting on questions such as; 'What are we doing', 'Why are we doing it?' and 'How can we do it better?' educators are prepared to put time and effort into the process because they know what they say and think will likely impact and significantly improve the outcome.

   The educators felt that things happen as a result of the critical reflection process. This empowers them to feel that they have a substantive say in how the ECEC centre is operated. This is consistent with the assertion of Fook, et al. (2006) that the critical reflection process enables educators to look beyond their immediate circumstances to the external factors that influence the choices made and the actions taken. This includes the social context and the broader context of the organisational culture and structure (Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

4. Critical reflection increases new understanding
Through the process of critical reflection new understandings emerge as educators objectively consider an issue, evaluate it, and then collegially share this with other team members. As active learners, educators rigorously question ideas and assumptions rather than accepting them at face value, and then identify, analyse and problem solve alternatives to arrive at the best possible solution. In other words, being critically reflective requires constantly gaining evidence about how effective or worthwhile actions are. Educators reported that in this way they can changed what they were doing, according to the evidence found. As identified by Fook and Askeland, (2006) this is "an ability to recognize our own influence – and the influence of our contexts, the type of knowledge we create, and the way we create it" (p. 45). This builds an integrated knowledge base through an active approach to learning, linking new to existing knowledge. Consistent with the literature, taken together, these capabilities are intrinsic to the development of an educator who is self-aware and self-regulated. Through questioning and testing theories in their practice, educators become empowered and encouraged to become researchers, to try new ideas and test theories (Vale, 2015).

5. Critical reflection facilitates the delegation of responsibility
Delegation is empowering others to make decisions. The findings of this study support the idea that delegation of responsibility is an outcome of critical reflective practices in ECEC. Through critically reflecting as educators, delegation becomes a helpful outcome and tool, because the discussion and reflection process enables the consequent allocation and distribution of team responsibilities and accountability. This encourages the growth and development of team members and their roles; supports succession planning and personal development. The recommendation for ECEC is that all centres should engage their educators in critical reflection because effective delegation improves overall efficiency, effectiveness and productivity. New avenues for creativity are opened and team enthusiasm promoted. Delegation of responsibility for tasks to others provides a leader an opportunity to focus on higher-level tasks. It provides others with the opportunity to learn and develop new skills, develops trust between educators, and improves communication. This enables educators to strengthen their critical thinking skills and increase their confidence, so enabling growth in potential and new leaders, as well as

supporting improvement in the quality of the ECEC provided (Reina et al., 2017).

6. Critical reflection promotes leadership development
The promotion of leadership is an important outcome of the implementation of critical reflection emerging from this study. Through critical reflection, leaders can analyse and adapt their approach to decision making and problem solving whenever the need arises to resolve a challenge. This happens at all levels of leadership and this impacts the performance of the organization. Critical reflection thereby makes desirable business results more likely. As team leaders repeatedly use the critical reflective process to workshop team goals, they develop their own leadership style and work practices to ensure work is completed within time schedules at the quality level required.

Critical reflection and the learning environment

From the previous paragraphs it is clear that engaging in critical reflection enhances ECEC operations. One of the most import results emerging from the study is how critical reflection impacts the ECEC learning environment. This study has found that when educators reflect on an experience with the aim to learn from that experience, new possibilities for learning unfold. As educators engage in critical reflection, grounded in reflective inquiry and reflective evaluation, they can, in turn, teach ways of thinking to others (Rodgers & La Boskey, 2016, p. 71). Reflective evaluation, therefore, has the potential to open up new possibilities for learning. In particular, in this study, educators reported the following:

1. Critical reflection helps educators identify areas of strength
A strengths-based approach requires educators to be engaged in reflective practice (Dept. of Education & Early Childhood Development, 2012). This approach views situations holistically and looks for opportunities to complement and support existing strengths and capacities. A strengths-based approach focusses on questioning strategies to identify what works and how it works within the learning environment so those strategies can be continued and developed. Identifying educator strengths through critical reflection is valuable as it allows the approach to tasks and challenges to proceed with better

understanding of how to succeed, and it also facilitates effective communication amongst educators on what they can contribute, and this helps facilitate continuous improvement. Educators reported that they identify areas of strength through critical reflection, they identify gaps and can focus on building complementary partnerships within their team that contribute to success.

2. Critical reflection increases pedagogical awareness of knowledge and skills required for learning
This study had found that, through individual and group reflections, critical reflection increases pedagogical knowledge and skill as educators examine: learning theory, research evidence, educational practice, various educators' experiences, and community expectations and requirements. Critical reflection informs both curriculum (all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events planned and unplanned) (ACECQA, 2012) and teaching in an ECEC centre. Educators felt that the shared understanding developed through critical reflection on pedagogy provides a strong foundation for the ongoing development of a learning environment. This allows educators within an ECEC centre to consider the evidence base underpinning their pedagogy and creates awareness of how they implement pedagogy in ECEC. High expectations for every child, every day, affirmed through critical reflection, can support educators to plan individually designed learning experiences (Arthur, et al., 2008).

3. Critical reflection empowers educators to engage children in learning
Quality experiences for children do not happen by themselves. This study supports the idea that critical reflection supports educators to engage children in learning. This provides educators with insight to inform future decision making. Critical reflection empowers educators to examine their interactions with children, assess the quality of learning environments and experiences, and analyse their own practice. Educators reported that their professional practice was strengthened by using reflection to develop deeper understandings, explore perspectives, working to improve the program and delivering better outcomes for

> "[empowered] educators … become more engaged in learning as they embrace the idea that learning is an iterative process, setting goals, checking their progress and adjusting their actions"

> "
> *An educator who models critical reflection in her own practice is a catalyst for critical thinking in children … an important indicator … to judge an educator's effectiveness.*
> "

the ECEC centre. By empowering educators, they become more engaged in learning as they embrace the idea that learning is an iterative process, setting goals, checking their progress and adjusting their actions, contributing to each child's outcomes of learning. The implication of this is that all educators should be engaged in critical reflection to engage children in learning to enhance each child's learning outcomes.

4. Critical reflection can be used as a tool with students to optimize the learning environment By engaging in critical reflection, educators reported that they gained a greater depth of understanding regarding each child's needs and abilities. This enables them to implement teaching practices that enhance learning teaching and learning for that particular child. When relationships are built upon a foundation of reflective evaluation, educators and families can work together to create a learning environment that caters for, and celebrates, diversity. As educators engage in critical reflection, they are empowered to build a sense of inclusivity and belonging. This contributes to the co-construction of the learning environment that maximizes outcomes for all children.

While critical reflection is a foundational element of the NQS (DEEWR, 2009). It is also a pedagogical tool that educators can model to students. As learning is social in nature "children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 34). In pedagogical terms, this growth is facilitated by the creation of democratic learning environments. Educators know that their actions can silence or activate children's voices. They listen attentively to what children say. They deliberately create reflective moments that become the focus of activity. All their actions are explicitly grounded in critical conversations with reference to children's experiences and what they know. An educator who models critical reflection in her own practice is a catalyst for critical thinking in children and for this reason, critical reflection should be an important indicator to look for in any attempt to judge an educator's effectiveness.

Conclusion
The results of the present study support the inclusion of critical thinking in ECEC and confirms the claims of the literature on the use of critical

reflection in ECEC settings. When educators think deeply about professional knowledge and practice good things happen. Especially when they come together as a critically reflective community. The overall result of this reflective activity is a strong sense amongst team members that they are working on authentic real-world problems and that this activity makes a difference. Team members collaborate and create new levels of understanding. The leadership of the group is enhanced as the reflective activity facilitates the delegation of responsibility in ways that raise the quality of the ECEC centre. One of the exciting aspects of critical reflective activity is the way that the learning environment is impacted. Areas of strength are identified amongst staff and the increased awareness of pedagogical knowledge and skills helps to maximise the learning environment and engage children in learning.

It would seem that critical reflection involves each educator in a continuous process of assessing their practice that informs collective collegial development of a learning community. The results of this study support the idea that critical reflection has a substantial impact on ECEC for the benefit of both staff and students. TEACH

References
Arthur, L., Beecher, B., Death, E., Dockett, S., & Farmer, S., (2008). *Programming and planning in early childhood* (4th ed.). Thompson.

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (ACECQA). (2012). *National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care*. ACECQA. Retrieved from https://acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/the-national-quality-standard

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (ACECQA). (2013). *Guide to the National Quality Standard*. Retrieved from https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/about/guide

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (ACECQA). (2018). *Developing a culture of reflective practice*. Retrieved from https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/acecqa/files/QualityInformationSheets/QualityArea1/DevelopingaCultureofLearningThroughReflectivePractice.pdf

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). Routledge.

Council of Australian Governments. (2009). *Regulation impact statement for early childhood education and care quality reforms*. DEEWR.

Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR). (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Documents/Final%20EYLF%20Framework%20Report%20---%20WEB.pdf

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2012). *Victorian early years learning and development framework: For children birth to eight years*. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from: https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf

Fook, J. (2002). *Social work: Critical theory and practice. Approach to practice*. Sage.

Fook, J. (2017). *Social work: A critical approach to practice*. Sage.

Fook, J., & Askeland, G. A. (2006). Challenges of critical reflection: Nothing ventured, nothing gained. *International Quarterly: Social Work Education, 16*(2), 1-4.

Fook, J., Gardner, F., & White, S. (2006). Critical reflection: A review of current understandings and literature. In S. White, J. Fook & F. Gardner (Eds.), *Critical reflection in health and welfare*. Open University Press.

Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practising critical reflection: A resource handbook*. Open University Press.

Kennedy, A. (2011). Pedagogy matters. *Every child, 17*(3), 24-25.

Ratelle, J. T., Wittich, C. M., Yu, R. C., Newman, J. S., Jenkins, S. M., & Beckman, T. J. (2017). Relationships between reflection and behaviour change in CME. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions, 37*(3), 161-167. doi:10.1097/CEH.0000000000000162

Reina, D., Reina, M., & Hudnut, D. (2017). *Why trust is critical to team success*. Center for Creative Leadership. Retrieved from https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/why-trust-is-critical-team-success-research-report.pdf

Rodgers, C., & LaBoskey, V. K. (2016). Reflective practice. In J. Loughran, & M. L. Hamilton (Eds.), *International handbook of teacher education* (pp. 71-104). doi:10.1007/978-981-10-0369-1_3

Thompson, N., & Pascal, J. (2012). Developing critically reflective practice. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives,13*(2), 311-325. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2012.657795

Vale, R. D. (2015). The value of asking questions. *Mol Biol Cell, 2013 Mar 15, 24*(6), 680–682. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3596240/

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Williams, D. (2019). An Inquiry into the Implementation of Critical Reflection in Early Childhood Education and Care. A Faith-based Case Study. Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Thesis. Avondale University.

Author information:

Debra Williams has worked in Early Childhood education in NSW, QLD and VIC in varied roles including validator, consultant, lecturer, facilitator, adviser, mentor, Director, Accreditation Supervisor and Manager. Her research interests include critical reflection, pedagogy, faith based Early Childhood Education and Care, learning and leadership. Debra is the National Compliance and Development Manager for Hillsong Child Care Centres.

Peter Beamish is a Senior Lecture in the School of Education and Science at Avondale University. He enjoys the shared journey of discovery that supervising PhD students delivers and is passionate about life and working with schools, teachers and students to see all in the school community flourish.