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**Supporting professional identity in undergraduate Early Years
students through reflective practice**

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Abstract

This study investigates how full-time undergraduates in Early Years conceptualise and judge good practice and how they evaluate and reflect on their own performance. It examines how students use reflective processes, and how the teaching of reflection supports the development of their individual professional vision, values and ethics. Data were gathered from first and second year students using semi-structured questions in interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. They conceptualise good practice as a combination of academic knowledge, interpersonal skills and intuitive responses to individual situations and report that they understand the processes of reflection. However, students continue to rely on other people to confirm that their practice is competent or good, and are reluctant to use or trust their own judgements about their performance. This indicates that a new pedagogic approach is required to instil in students greater acceptance of their placement experiences as vehicles for learning, and more confidence in their own abilities and authority to judge professional practice.

Key words

Reflective practice; reflection; evaluation; Early Years; workplace learning; good practice.

Introduction

The degree programme for Early Years students initially comprised a Foundation degree (FdA), a Level 5 qualification equating the first two years of a standard Bachelor of Honours degree, followed by an optional top-up course for students wishing to achieve their full BA Hons qualification. For full time students this was a three year programme of study incorporating 480 hours of work placement in three Early Years settings, and for part-time students it was a five year programme, to be completed alongside their existing employment in the Early Years sector. Whilst such routes continue to be offered in other HEIs, within our own establishment this provision is about to change and become a standard BA Hons Early Years programme, with the same placement element for full-time students and a four year study route for part-time students working in the Early Years sector.

Early Years graduate practitioners are expected to be able to model good practice for their colleagues and play a lead role in the planning and delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) requirements for all children in their care. The Childcare Workforce Development Council (CWDC) has identified the need for reflective lead practitioners who “review, analyse and evaluate their own and others’ practice” (CWDC, 2008, p.5). These practitioners must have a strong understanding of how children learn and develop, how best a child’s individual developmental needs may be met, and how observation and assessment can inform the planning process to support children’s learning and development. In particular, they need to be able to identify the key elements of good practice in their own and others’ work, to be able to share these with their colleagues and to encourage the development of a setting-wide culture of linking theory to practice to promote continuous improvement. Above all, for Early Years practice to be driven forward, and for the Early Years practitioners to develop their professional credibility, they need to be able to reflect on the wider implications of their practices in meeting not only children’s individual needs but a broader social and educational agenda.

To begin to do this, practitioners need to be able to reflect on their own actions, and draw from their analysis a vision of how this practice can be improved upon or shared. At the start of their studies, all students are taught to use reflection to develop their competence as practitioners. At this point, whilst levels of professional experience differ greatly, especially between the part-time and full-time students, experience has shown that all students are equally unfamiliar with the concept of reflection, and share common anxieties about engaging with a form of learning that is very personal, and very different from their previous educational experiences. The teaching of reflection includes an examination and evaluation of various theories and models of reflection (including such writers as Gibbs, Johns, Goodman, Schon, and others) and a requirement that they apply the processes of reflection to their own professional or placement experience, week by week. Assessment in the first year of their studies includes the submission of a number of reflective accounts with some evaluation of personal learning and the students' success of applying theory to practice. They then move on to use reflection to plan and evaluate their own professional development, again in their employment or their work placement, during the intermediate phase of the course (i.e. Year 2 for full-time students, Year 3 for part-time students). In the final year of teaching, it is expected that students are now sufficiently familiar with theories and processes of reflection to be able to apply it to their studies and their practice on an ongoing basis. To be able to do this they need to develop their own concepts of good practice and appropriate professional standards, and value and learn from their personal experiences.

Reflection, Knowledge and Contextualised Learning

It is difficult to find a clear and succinct definition of what reflection actually is. As Moon (1999, p. viii) points out, "the following words can apparently be synonymous with reflection – reasoning, thinking, reviewing, problem solving, inquiry, reflective judgement, reflective

thinking, critical reflection” and so on. Indeed, it is even debateable whether there should be a single, universal definition for what is essentially a personally driven, process, based on the professional learning needs of the individual.

Overall it would appear that reflection can be described as a retrospective and critical practice (Proctor, 1993, cited in Moon, 1999), where previous experience is brought to bear on new and unfamiliar situations. Reflection is a continuous process that, when used with intent, allows the practitioner to understand their actions better and analyse their practice for its effectiveness and for the values it represents (Johns, 2004). In early years practice, the purpose of reflection is to provoke thought about past and present practice in order to improve it in the future. It reframes thinking by working, at a distance from the event, through behaviour, feelings and thoughts, (Boud et al 1985), to produce a more mature learner with more sophisticated understanding. However the nature of the learning will vary with the individual and will contain elements of serendipity, depending on what the practitioner considers worthy of reflection. It is perhaps this uncertainty that is reflected in student concerns.

Robert Glaser¹ suggests that, in general, expert knowledge is built up over time through perceptual abilities and knowledge organisation which results in the ability to recognise familiar patterns and anticipate a range of consequences. Combined with the ability to constantly self monitor and regulate behaviour, the learning process can become automated or adapted as appropriate, (McCormick & Paechter, 1999). Situational and collaborative views of learning suggest there may be many aspects to building up expertise in a given field of study. Methods and solutions may vary with the situation and the narrative of the people involved (Bruner, 1996). The role of reflection then is fundamental to the development of expertise and the process requires an individual to take responsibility for their actions.

For Early Years students the reflective process should involve the application of domain specific knowledge, understanding and skills appertaining to child development and well being, as well as more generic ones such as communication and empathy. When shared, reflections can empower practitioners to improve practice. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF 2007) was promoted as a tool for ensuring quality play based provision, but it can also be used as a regulatory tool in a sector, which is exceedingly diverse in its provision and the qualifications of its staff. Focussing on the detail of curriculum outcomes may well inhibit the promotion of broader principles, and many Early Years professionals would identify an inherent technical limitation as being at the heart of the discussion around quality in early years provision. The EYFS currently in mandatory use across the sector seeks to resolve this conflict by requiring that practitioners understand the processes of reflection and use these to guide their own and their colleagues' practice (DCSF, 2008). Peter Mossⁱⁱ identifies "the reflective practitioner, [as being] in marked contrast to the worker-as-technician," (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008, p xiii).

The psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist offers a theoretical explanation of the above dilemma with his concept of the divided brain (McGilchrist, 2009). He maintains that western culture's preoccupation with the left hemisphere of the brain, and its focus on the immediate, has manipulated our cultural learning at the expense of the right hemisphere's broader contextual understanding and empathy. This could explain our desire for the 'right answer' to a technical problem, or compliance with a regulatory framework, rather than giving attention to the overall situation.

Russell (2005) argues that reflection can and should be explicitly taught despite the fact that for many educators advocating it, it remains an invisible process. He adopts an approach of encouraging students to describe their experiences in the form of a free-hand diary, with the inclusion of questions at regular intervals to guide or structure their thinking. The success of this approach lies in the empowerment offered to the students. By having no models or plans

to follow there are no right or wrong answers, no right or wrong way to focus their ideas, just the opportunity to think about their practice experience and what they have gained from it. However this approach still relies on students being able to evaluate their experience within a framework of what they consider effective practice to be. It also relies on the novice practitioner having the confidence to present and interpret their experience as they consider appropriate, and to use this as a base for their professional learning through the persuasion of others.

The study of confidence and self esteem, deemed soft skills, has recently been given some prominence. The influence of these attributes is acknowledged, though it is hard to quantify that influence. A study by Eldred et al at attempting to 'catch confidence' developing, defines it in this way:

Confidence is a belief in one's own abilities to do something in a specific situation.

This belief includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation.

(Eldred et al, 2004, p.6)

There does appear to be a symbiotic relationship between the confidence and self esteem. A healthy self esteem, one that is accepting but realistic towards the self, is said to promote confidence. Confidence involves thought, actions and feelings, those attributes of efficacy also present in learning and reflection, and which also contribute to a sense of agency and professional responsibility.

Reflection, then, draws on an ontology and epistemology where the social world of work is created through the interactions and negotiated shared meanings of its participants. As both Dewey and Habermas (Moon, 1999) argue, reflection is making sense of the world, and reflection should be an empowering process. There are no universal rules for good practice in early years, although regulatory frameworks and guidelines exist to guide practitioners in meeting minimum quality standards for education, care and professional conduct. Students

and practitioners must make their own sense of the social and professional world in which they operate and accept the notion that they can negotiate and create their own professional and personal identities (Russell, 2005). The question remains: how can the teaching environment support undergraduates in developing or articulating their individual visions of practice, in order for their reflections to be effective?

Barriers to Reflection

A survey conducted with a group of full-time second year students (Dyer and Taylor, 2010) identified that one of the main barriers they felt they faced in reflection was knowing how to judge their performance, and feeling confident that if *they* were satisfied or dissatisfied with their performance this was both an accurate and a valid judgement. These were students with a full year of academic study behind them, including 240 hours of placement experience, during which they had been encouraged to comment on the practice they had seen in Early Years settings, and to pass judgement on the effectiveness of the support offered for children's learning and development and the quality of adult/child interactions. They were also well-versed in the planning and evaluation of learning activities against the framework of either the National Curriculum or the EYFS, as well as conducting observations, and identifying children's individual learning needs. Yet when evaluating their own performance on such tasks as these they felt uneasy judging themselves and unsure about the standards they should be applying.

This indicates that as yet these students have not adopted the ontology and epistemology required for reflection. As novice learners are inclined to require a set of rules to follow, models of reflection may prove popular but ultimately unsatisfactory, as they encourage the following of processes without developing a sense of agency in the student. Without this development, if novice practitioners continue to rely on external validation for their actions they will be held back from ever acquiring their own value system, and still further from evaluating and developing it as their experience grows.

Essential elements of the teaching of reflection would seem then to include exploring how to value the experiences individual students get from their work placements, and a discussion of the concept of good practice, based on individual values and priorities of students. Whilst it is not the role of the teaching environment to state categorically what good practice is and always will be, it is within the teacher's remit to raise awareness of what such a concept might include and guide students to articulate this in their own ways. This study therefore aims to investigate:

1. how Early Years undergraduates conceptualise good practice in Early Years and how they judge this in others
2. the role of work placement in supporting the development of professional practice
3. how/if they use their own experience and concepts of good practice when reflecting on their own performance

Methodology

An in-depth investigation of individuals' perceptions has been attempted, that focuses on each individual's sense making of their professional world and their individual approaches to self evaluation. In undertaking such an investigation, the researchers both acknowledge that their position as tutors and mentors to these novice practitioners may have influenced the data provided by participants and has shaped the content of the investigation. The aim overall is to address the effectiveness of the teaching these students receive, and thus the questions posed are centred on issues of the content and application of taught elements of the undergraduate programme.

Participants needed to be given the opportunity to express their ideas freely and at length, with little overriding structure if their ideas were to be truly their own, with no leading from the researcher, no imposition of terms and constructs that encourage the participants to feel

they must include in their answers required terminology and content. Thus the use of semi-structured or open-ended questions, by means of interview or questionnaire, provided participants with the opportunity to formalise and articulate their views. Semi-structured questioning also offered the researchers the opportunity to gather a detailed description of experiences and emotions, through a process of being open to new ideas presented by the respondent and following these through, with the opportunity to clarify ambiguities (Kvale, 2007). This individual approach also ensured that even the quietest voice, the least confidently formed opinions were heard.

This approach was further supported by the use of a focus group discussion, which offered “a permissive environment ... that encourages participants to share perceptions” (Krueger and Casey 2009, p.2). The interaction of such a discussion also offered the participants the support they required to clarify and articulate their views without the risk of researcher-bias in the expression of constructs and concepts.

Since this research was undertaken by tutors responsible for guiding and assessing the professional development of the students who participated, it was essential that the researchers were accurate in the recording and presentation of the data gathered and objective in their analysis, to be able to use the results of the investigation to address change in their teaching programme. Similarly, it was particularly important in this investigation then that the participants regarded the researchers as individuals with a genuine interest in and acceptance of their understanding and their experiences, and as individuals open to hearing their ideas. The researchers acknowledged the emotional framework of the interview process and accepted the need for a researcher to adopt an attitude of “attentive openness” (Ezzy, 2010, p.168) rather than seeing the interview as an opportunity for probing and intrusion. Accordingly, the researchers have implemented their methodology adopting the notion of the interviewer as a fellow traveller, who “walks along

with the local inhabitants, asking questions and encouraging them to tell their own stories of their lived world” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.48).

The five individual interviews were carried out by the same researcher who conducted the initial survey in response to students’ early experiences of the teaching of reflective practice. The focus group discussions were moderated by one researcher only, and the questionnaires were analysed and discussed by both researchers. Participants were offered the opportunity to check the accuracy of the recording of the data gathered.

The participants in this investigation are all full-time students undertaking the FdA/BA Hons Early Years. Their selection was based their experience of working in the early years sector as evidenced in their application for a place on the course and their previous qualifications, their confidence in their studies and their willingness to discuss their opinions and ideas in class and in individual tutorial meetings. Each participant was offered the opportunity to decline at the start of the study or to withdraw at any point up to data interpretation. 6 first year FdA students completed questionnaires and 5 second year FdA students participated in individual interviews. Three separate focus groups were also formed, comprising respectively 18 first year FdA students, 12 second year FdA students and 6 BA Hons (equivalent third year) students.

Approach to Data Analysis

Data analysis for this investigation follows a 5 stage approach (Schmidt,2004) of setting up categories for analysis in response to the data, testing and revising these, coding all data then identifying individual cases for further analysis and finally selecting cases for discussion and from which conclusions can be drawn. Bohm (2004) argues that in-vivo codes, “colloquial interpretations of the phenomena ... taken directly from the language of the field of investigation” (Bohm, 2004, p. 271) are most valuable to the researcher, as these are

presented in the language of the participants themselves, in part addressing the ethical issue of whose interpretation of the data is being presented. By taking this emergent, inductive approach to the data analysis the researchers have been able to avoid pre-empting the research findings, and leading participants' responses in the course of the data gathering.

Results

The initial in-vivo coding of the interview data shows much variation in how each second year participant conceptualises good practice in Early Years, and the differing balance between skills and personal qualities considered by all participants to be important. Codes drawn from the initial data analysis include child centred, child focussed, child enjoying, rapport, relationships, a love of children, communication, team work, planning, and observation.

Participant 1 makes it clear that her view of good practice concentrates largely on meeting the individual children's needs and forming good relationships with children:

the majority of it should [be] that the child's enjoying [it] the child's learning from it ... and they've got a good rapport with the ... the, the person, the adult that's working with them

Similarly Participant 5 defines good practice in terms of approach to children and enthusiasm for the job:

caring about children, caring about their development, not just caring about their educational performance, caring about their personal life as well

She sums it up at the end of her interview as "I think commitment, that's about it – the biggest thing for me". Both these participants then feel good practice is largely a socially defined concept, dependent on the relationships between participants in an event or situation.

By contrast, Participants 2 and 3 explain good practice in terms more of context-free skills and competences, with Participant 2's conceptualisation being couched in terms close to the language of The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce (DfES, 2008).

offering praise and encouragement to all children ... being able to work as a team again ... being able to work with parents appropriately ... and just general all round having their own initiative (Participant 2)

giving children choices, listening to them, ensuring that they are free to explore everything that they want to, that they can take any learning further and any interest that they've got within that learning further as well (Participant 3)

The Year 2 interview participants differ in their conceptualisations of good practice when it comes to including ensuring children meet externally set educational or developmental targets, and which aspects of development are more important for practitioners to support than others. Whilst Participant 1 felt it was most important for practitioners to support and promote a child's self-esteem, Participants 3, 4 and 5 all considered good practice to be measurable in terms of how children were progressing in their learning as well as their confidence.

The first year students' definitions of developing Early Years practice, gathered after the first ten week placement had been completed and the second one was being undertaken, encompass a mix of personal qualities and practical skills in a similar way. Participants 6, 7 and 8 focus on tasks:

I use my initiative, more setting up activities, etc (Participant 6)

Helping children when stuck with work (Participant 7)

Making sure I was always busy doing jobs (Participant 8)

Other first year participants identified more interpersonal qualities as key aspects for developing good practice:

I managed to develop my people skills ... I developed my teamwork skills ... and sensitivity to others (Participant 11)

I feel good working with the children. I can talk to the staff and ask for help (Participant 6)

Got on with all staff (Participant 7)

The role of the placement supervisor is also regarded as a key factor in the development of good practice by the first year students:

I'm not sure what it would be like if my supervisor wasn't so helpful (Participant 9)

Clearly the development of competence in Early Years practice is regarded as dependent on the nature of the workplace the novice finds themselves in and the support they get from forming relationships with their colleagues.

Participant 11 acknowledged the need to allow time for development of good practice and perspective in judging performance:

I think developing initiative and sensitivity to others comes in time ... Once you establish the routine and become familiar you begin to use your initiative more. You know when things are out of place"

Participant 5 is also the only second year participant in this study to see good practice as emerging over time, based on experience:

there's no way I've got the in-field experience that they've got working in the field all day every day

She feels her own lack of experience limits her authority to judge practice in others and undermines her confidence in judging her own performance.

However this acknowledgment of time and experience being key factors in good practice also stresses the situated dimension of this judgement. What this participant regards as important is not just time and experience in any workplace, but time and experience in a specific workplace. Good practice may develop in one place but for it to be transferrable elsewhere, time and experience again may be equally important.

The first year participants reported that they felt placement experience had enabled them to link theory to practice and they regarded their placement colleagues as individuals they could learn from:

I made the supervisor aware of what activities I was going to be doing and reflected on this with the supervisor. (Participant 9)

How to improve and get more from them (Participant 10)

They also felt they had contributed their ideas to the setting:

Swapped ideas for activities (Participant 7)

I suggested they could put a dark sheet over the den and let the children go in with torches. (Participant 11)

All five second year participants discuss their use of the reflection process and models of reflection but seem unsure of how they judge their own practice. None of them would use formal documents such as inspection reports or regulatory frameworks to judge practice but preferred to rely on some external, interpersonal source of evidence for their judgements – practitioners' behaviour, children's reactions and progression – rather than comparing the practice they see to their own understanding of how such frameworks and policy documents should be implemented. Some of the reported reflection that takes place is informal:

I just tend to look back at what I've just done, just informally in me head

(Practitioner 3)

I used to use Johns' model of reflection but now it's more, I think 'cos I've tried a couple of different ones I've like adapted a few of them (Practitioner 1)

Other participants reported using feedback from the children:

basically have the children understood what I'm trying to do with the activity

(Practitioner 4)

I can look at something and know that child has said to me at the end of it 'I really enjoyed that' or 'I can do this now', 'I can do that now' and that's how I judge it

(Participant 1)

There would seem then to be an implicit link between the student's evaluation of her performance and the outcomes of an activity for the child. However, the student makes no overt link between this positive outcome and her own performance – this child has enjoyed the activity or learnt something from it which means her (the student's) practice has been effective or good, but precisely what aspect of her practice has achieved this is not yet identified. Again this suggests that although these participants are recognising when they might review practice and what means they can use to do so, they do not always recognise when they are evaluating their own performance or reflecting against their own standards or values.

Some of the reflection is guided by particular models taught in class, including Gibbs (1988) and Johns (2004)

Gibbs, yeah, that one I used ... and I found the questions really easy to identify with
(Participant 5)

Much of the reflection that takes place is in response to what is considered to be poor practice – activities that do not achieve their intended outcomes, behaviour management situations, things that go unexpectedly wrong, reflecting Jaworski's view that reflection should be initiated by surprise. Whilst the participants acknowledge that their practice is often successful there is little discussion of them reflecting on these occasions.

The first year students' focus group also reported being drawn to reflection by surprise:

Something extreme – happy or sad. Something interesting or different.

However these students are more prepared to accept that this can include situations that go well, or even that their own ideas or opinions are valid, as one participant reported reflecting on "Supervisor's ideas about children – whether I agree or disagree". It would seem that for these students reflection could be a process offering validation of their own values and beliefs, rather than simply an opportunity for critically reviewing their performance.

The most striking aspect of the second year participants' self evaluation however was their reluctance to use or trust their own judgements. All five participants preferred to use observations and feedback from their mentor/supervisor, even Participant 2 with the most skills-based approach to defining good practice:

Participant 2: You probably ask other people in your setting to you know observe you for a while on different aspects

Interviewer: For them to choose the aspects or for you to decide?

Participant 2: For them, probably for them to decide 'cos they can see from a different point of view from than what you can

It is interesting to note, however, that the one second year participant who admitted she found reflection and its emphasis on self-evaluation particularly difficult and undermining to her confidence, was the only participant to report on reflection as an empowering process (Habermas, cited in Moon, 1999):

it said *you* a lot and I never thought about it like that before, I just, seeing, you know, this child behaved negatively, this is ... I could have done that ... but I didn't think I could have that much influence on a situation? So now I've realised I can influence a situation, especially where children's behaviour is concerned. It's a lot easier for me to understand what I can and can't do in certain situations (Participant 5)

Clearly the process of reflection has demonstrated to this participant that she has abilities and authority she was unaware of, but she remains reluctant to trust own judgement without further experience and external validation in the form of qualifications:

Interviewer: ... you want someone else to tell you whether you're measuring up to it?

Participant 5: ... until I'm properly qualified

Although her whole interview suggests she is a very committed and conscientious practitioner with ambitions to emulate her mentor, she does not make any claim in her own practice to the level of commitment she admires in others.

Conclusions

Good practice then is something these students seem to see as belonging to experienced practitioners, and which they will develop through placement experience. It combines

specific, context-free knowledge and an individual response to the social situation of the Early Years setting and its inhabitants. Students vary in their conceptualisation of how these two elements are balanced in an overall definition of good practice. At present their reflection on their own practice is a process of identifying and addressing weaknesses, responding to events that take them by surprise (Jaworski, 1993) and a process of reviewing and problem solving (Moon, 1999), seeking confirmations on their ideas from a designated authority figure. It does not yet appear to be a process of personally evaluating practice within current regulatory frameworks and policies, or against personal values and beliefs (Johns, 2004).

The processes of reflection are known to all these students, and some of the models they have researched are being implemented. However, the explicit teaching of the processes and models of reflection, intended to empower these novices in monitoring and evaluating their practice and professional development, may in fact have promoted the creation of technicians. Where reflection should lead to the development of creative and free-thinking experts in the professional field, it has instead led students to believe that there are external and universal rules for good practice that are known to more experienced practitioners, against which they must be measured. The students are now skilled in the setting out and completing of models to guide a reflective review of their performance, but they appear to separate this from their ongoing professional practice and the judgements of their workplace mentors. As yet they have not begun to question the validity of these opinions or the external frameworks that guide practice such as the EYFS (DCSF, 2007) and Every Child Matters outcomes (DCSF, 2004) to decide for themselves what are appropriate criteria for judging and evaluating practice.

Reflection, then, is not yet the empowering process it could be for these students. They need to understand how reflection can support them in acknowledging and using their experience from the workplace, and to be able to see strengths as well as weaknesses in their practice. They need to be more aware of what they consider good practice to be and how this can be

measured by themselves rather than by others. They need to acquire the knowledge to be able to judge the opinions of other professionals and the regulatory frameworks within which they are required to work. They need to develop a sense of agency to be able to deal with uncertainty. Then their newness may become an advantage in taking a creative approach to reflection, rather than seeking definitive or habitual solutions. According to Wilson (1990) cited in Berthelsen and Brownlee (2006), timely and appropriate intervention offers the opportunity for modification before custom and practice become set, and opinions impervious to modification as can happen in more experienced workers.

Their reflections therefore now need to focus on how they as individuals make sense of and respond to unique social situations. However, without greater awareness of how this measures up to their personal concepts of good practice it will not offer them transferable knowledge to take to different situations or even new employment.

These students therefore need to develop the self-confidence identified by Eldred (2004) in order to accept that their own professional experience is a valid and effective learning tool. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) argue that expertise is a combination of context-free knowledge and experience of many new and different situations, so that what appears to be an intuitive yet appropriate response to a situation is in fact the drawing on situated experience and context-free knowledge. These students need to accept that whilst as yet they are beginning this process, their own experience and learning are still as valid and important as the views of more expert others.

The pedagogic approach to be adopted in the teaching of reflective practice should now include a focus on the sharing of personal experiences from placement and the learning drawn from it in a non-threatening environment – either by means of open discussion, anonymised written accounts, or personal placement diaries. There should also be greater emphasis placed on the exploration of context-free frameworks – the Early Years

Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2007), the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004), The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce (DfES, 2008) – to support the articulation of individuals' definitions of good practice and to support their judgements of practice in specific work situations. Wenger (1998, p.217) argues that "The combination of engagement and imagination results in reflective practice." Whilst workplace experience is vital to these students' professional learning, they must also be encouraged to bring an element of creativity to this arena for them to fully develop and evaluate their practice.

Such approaches will increase the students' confidence in and acceptance of their own judgements, their own experiences, and their own professional learning. They will also encourage a greater sense of responsibility for personal and professional learning, and increase the potential for reflection to become an empowering experience. By being less reliant on the opinions, values and judgements of others, these students are more likely to develop their own vision of good practice and their own professional ethics and values, so that with experience and the learning it brings they become the confident lead practitioners that the Early Years sector and individual employers seek.

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