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Supporting professional identity in novice practitioners through reflective practice

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Abstract

This study investigates how full-time students on the Foundation degree (FdA) in Early Years develop a professional identity as early years practitioners, including how they conceptualise and judge good practice and how they evaluate and reflect on their own performance. The overall purpose of this study is to examine how students use the reflective processes they have been taught when on work placement, and how the teaching of reflection supports the development of their individual professional vision, values and ethics.

Data were gathered from Year 1 and Year 2 students undertaking the full-time FdA Early Years, using semi-structured questions in interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. Good practice is conceptualised as a combination of academic knowledge, interpersonal skills and intuitive responses to individual situations. The students feel they understand the processes of reflection and are growing in confidence in their use of some of the models they have been taught. However, the data also indicate that 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.

The results of this investigation indicate 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. Such an approach will support the development of the more mindful and reflective lead practitioner the early years sector and individual employers need.

Key words: reflective practice, reflection, evaluation, early years, workplace learning, good practice.

Introduction

Graduates of the FdA Early Years course 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 their 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 mindful practice and 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. This investigation therefore considers the role of reflection in supporting the development of the

professional identity and values of novice practitioners. In Year 1 of the FdA Early Years students are taught to use reflection to develop their competence as practitioners. In Year 2 they move on to use reflection to plan their own professional development. 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 and Learning
Many theories of learning assume a hierarchy of knowledge, moving from the mastery of skills through to conceptual and applied knowledge, and ultimately to metacognitive knowledge. Typical of this approach is the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) which breaks down and orders the thinking strategies required for effective learning, from remembering through application and analysis to the creation of new knowledge. The approach is offered as a tool for teaching and assessing learning.

It is, however, limited in its application to teaching as it deals with learning as 'knowledge demonstrated', a deductive approach, rather than learning as an inductive process which is more typical of professional development. Although a hierarchical approach acknowledges that knowledge is a process of construction, it is not clear how the construction takes place. Indeed the arguments surrounding the processes of learning suggest there may be many ways of building up expertise in a given field of study.

Robert Glaser 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). The role of reflection then is fundamental to the development of expertise. However, 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 an individual.

Consensus allows that reflection is a retrospective and critical practice (Proctor, 1993, cited in Moon, 1999), where previous experience is brought to bear on new and unfamiliar situations. Reflective practice incorporates noticing elements of one's own practice, especially those that cause surprise for the practitioner (Jaworski, 1993). 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.

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. It should manifest itself in actions and future modifications of those actions, which if shared can empower practitioners to improve practice. The Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF 2007) was promoted as a tool for ensuring quality play based provision, but it can also be viewed as a regulatory tool in a sector which is exceedingly diverse in its provision and the qualifications of its staff. Many early years professionals would identify an inherent technical

limitation as being at the heart of the discussion around quality in early years provision. Peter Moss identifies "*the reflective practitioner, [as being] in marked contrast to the worker-as-technician,*" (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008, p xiii).

In young children's learning Moyles (1991) defines the mix of unconscious situated learning through play and conscious learning through teaching, as a process of 'accretion'. This geological term echoes Dewey's description from 1910 of 'a learning spiral'. His idea that learning develops from 'common-sense' explanations of situations experienced, and that with repetition became solidified, explains how unconscious learning takes root. Dewey suggests, however, that to advance thinking, common sense should be further refined through the application of more reasoned and objective consideration. Situated repetition may be needed to reify learning, (Wenger 1998) but timely and appropriate intervention also offers the opportunity for modification before custom and practice become set, and opinions impervious to modification as can happen in more experienced workers (Wilson (1990) cited in Bethelsen and Brownlee (2006).

According to Moon (1999) a deep, metacognitive approach to learning demonstrates intent or purpose, linking both the discipline and organisation of the subject knowledge with the impulse and motivation required for progression. Dewey, though he took a pragmatic approach to learning, did not appear to pay much attention to motivation. More modern perspectives on engagement such as those expressed by Laevers (2003) consider motivation to be vital for learning and for motivating children to learn. The Effective Early Learning (EEL) project developed from his work identified among other attributes that sensitivity was required from adults working with children to promote learning, including qualities such as empathy, and behaviours such as showing respect and positive regard, (Pascal and Bertram 1997).These are thought to raise self esteem and efficacy in learning.

The study of confidence and self esteem, deemed soft skills, is a relatively recent area of investigation. 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. The reference implies that confidence involves thought actions and feelings, those attributes of efficacy also present in learning and reflection.

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 teaching to be. It also relies on the novice practitioner having the confidence to accept that they have the right to present and interpret their experience as they consider appropriate, and to use this as a base for their professional learning

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. There

are no universal rules for good practice in early years. Wenger, (1998, p217) states, *"The combination of engagement and imagination results in reflective practice."* Russell (2005) shares with his students the belief that they can negotiate and create their own professional and personal identities Practitioners must make their own sense of the social and professional world in which they operate. As both Dewey and Habermas (Moon, 1999) argue, reflection is making sense of the world, and reflection is an empowering process. However, such personal responsibility can also be a daunting prospect. The question remains: how can the teaching environment support Foundation degree students in developing or articulating their visions of practice, in order for their reflections to be effective?

Research Themes
A survey conducted with a group of Year 2 full-time students at the start of their second year of studies 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 felt free 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 indentifying 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. 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. Furthermore they will be inhibited from describing their concepts of good practice to future employers, sharing them with future colleagues, and contributing to the future development of the sector in which they work.

This development can be achieved through a combination of evaluating their own performance over a period of time in the workplace as well as reflecting on the actions of others in the same setting. Initially, this inevitably leads to a somewhat situated concept of good practice, defined in terms of working with a particular set of colleagues and children, in a single setting. However, it also enables the practitioner to develop their own set of principles, transferrable to any professional setting or situation, which will underpin their professional practice throughout their career.

Essential elements therefore of the teaching of reflection would seem to include discussion on 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 learning 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 FdA students 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
The aim of this study was not to uncover a single, shared approach to identifying good practice and its use in reflective thinking, nor was this an investigation focussing on the use of particular strategies or categories for conceptualising good practice. Rather, an in-depth investigation of individuals' perceptions was more appropriate, that focused on each individual's sense making of their professional world and their individual approaches to self evaluation.

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. Since the questions were only semi-structured they offered shape and focus to the data gathering process, the support of some possible terms and constructs for participants when expressing their ideas, and yet did not constrict the answers given to a limited set of options or to notions of 'right' or acceptable answers. 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 offer:
> "a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue" and "a permissive environment ... that encourages participants to share perceptions"
> (Krueger and Casey 2009, p.2)

The interaction of such a discussion 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.

The researchers also 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. It was particularly important in this investigation 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. To ensure this, the researchers have implemented their methodology adopting Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) 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).

All 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. Table 1 (Appendix 1) shows the interview schedule adopted for this study, identifying the overall broad questions to be used, the possible prompts and exploration that might be needed to help participants articulate their views and how these two are related to the research aims for the investigation. A copy of the questionnaire and questions for the focus groups can be found in Appendices 2 and 3.

The participants in this investigation are Year 1 and 2 students undertaking the FdA Early Years, which includes two modules teaching reflective practice and professional development and a minimum of 480 hours of work placement. The selection of participants for this study was based on previous knowledge of these individuals. Each participant was offered the opportunity to decline at the start of the study or to withdraw at any point up to data interpretation.

Approach to Data Analysis
Data analysis for this investigation follows the 5 stage approach Schmidt (2004) advocates 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. Bohm (2004) also advocates the use of memos "based on the coding notes ... and on broad interrelations that are gradually revealed by the investigator" (Bohm, 2004, p.271). 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 Year 2 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 /erm/ and they've got a good rapport with the /erm/ the, the person, the adult that's working with them"

She also makes it clear that good practice stems from a desire to work with children:

> "you need to be passionate about children"

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.

Participant 5 is also the only Year 2 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.

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 (REF) and the learning outcomes of the FdA Early Years she has just completed.

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

> "they need to be caring /erm/ being able to share information appropriately /erm/ listen to other team members as well" (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)

> "I think a good set of empathy skills is important so you can connect with the child and get to know then quite well" (Participant 3)

Again both these participants make it clear that practitioners need to know the individual children they are working with, to understand their different needs, to be able to follow up their interests when planning future learning activities, i.e. to place these children at the centre of their practice. However, it seems that for them good practice comprises a set of skills and competences a practitioner brings with them to a situation rather than something which emerges in response to a situation.

It is clear across the five interviews that the 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 Year 1 students' definitions of developing early years practice identified from the questionnaire encompasses 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 buy doing jobs" (Participant 8)

Similar concepts were identified when considering their own developing role on work placement:

> "Helping the lower ability children, reading with the children" (Participant 8)

> "Support for the children when [they] need it, and help their learning where [I] can" (Participant 10)

Other Year 1 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)

These interpersonal qualities were again identified as key aspects of their role on work placement:

> "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 Year 1 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 also acknowledges 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"

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.

Some overall shared concepts were identified. Knowledge of children as individuals, including their interests, home backgrounds, abilities was a key aspect of good practice as was the meeting of individual needs and the use of planning. All participants discussed the need for high quality interaction/relationship between practitioner and child although this is never more clearly defined.

The Year 1 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)

Good practice is judged by the Year 2 students in terms of children's outcomes and feedback, – children's enjoyment, progression in their learning, enhanced self-esteem, good rapport and relationships with practitioners:

> "I think a lot of it depends on how the child reacts to them" (Practitioner 3)

> "look at how the children, say they're doing an activity and how the children have interpreted what they've been told to do, like if the practitioner gives them loads of detailed instructions and see how they come about with the result of what they're going to do" (Practitioner 4)

> "I'd be looking for people going 'oh I've got to observe again, ergh, I've got to do my planning again, ergh' which everyone gets stressed now and again but if it's a regular occurrence then it don't seem to be like that ... that they're very into it" (Practitioner 5)

None of the Year 2 participants would use formal documents such as inspection reports to judge practice but they all prefer to rely on some external source of evidence for their judgements – practitioners' behaviour, children's reactions and progression – rather than comparing the practice they see to their own values of beliefs.

All five Year 2 participants discuss their use of the reflection process and models of reflection but seem unsure of how they judge their own practice. 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)

Some of the reflection is guided by particular models:

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

> "I use the first one we did – is it Gibbs" (Participant 4)

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 most striking aspect of the Year 2 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"

Other participants also reported using feedback from children – rapport, confidence, relationship and interaction, progression in learning – to measure their own performance:

"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 no overt link between the participants' own conceptualisations of good practice and their evaluation of their own performance. Again this suggests that although these participants are recognising when they might review practice and what means they can use to do so, they are not truly reflecting against their own standards or values.

The Year 1 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.

It is interesting to note, however, that the one Year 2 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 on others.

Conclusions

Concepts of good practice and reflection
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) rather than a process of evaluating practice within current regulatory frameworks and policies, or against personal values and beliefs (Johns, 2004).

As yet reflection is not the empowering process it could be for these participants. These students 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.

The processes of reflection are known to all these students, and some of the models and processes they have researched are being implemented. Their reflections 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 concepts of good practice it will not offer them transferrable knowledge to take to different situations or even new employment.

Implications for Teaching

These students 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 – 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.

Such an approach will increase the students' confidence in and acceptance of their own judgements, their own experiences, and their own professional learning. By being less reliant on the opinions, values and judgements of others, they 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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Appendix 1

Table 1: Interview Schedule

MAIN QUESTION	PROMPTS/FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS	TO INVESTIGATE
What do you consider to be good practice in early years?	Is there a particular person you would say is a good/model practitioner – why, what makes them so special? Are there particular skills/knowledge that you think a good practitioner needs? Is there something else that makes a good practitioner – personal qualities, imagination? Why are these important? Does the Common Core define good practice, or any other set of criteria? Are there 'grades' or different degrees of good? Essential or optional elements of good?	Is this an overall vision of practice or set of external criteria from Common Core, NVQ Level 3 standards, etc? Is good practice knowledge/skills or personal qualities and talents?
How do you measure how good a practitioner is? How would you decide if someone is a good practitioner?	Achievement of outcomes? Children's progression? Happy children, parents, staff? Inspection reports? Complaints?	Externally defined? Task/outcome oriented? People (especially children) oriented?
How do you decide if your practice is good or weak?	Wait for feedback from others – supervisor, tutor, colleagues? Response from children? Outcome of task/activity? Own intuition/personal satisfaction? Review of self against set criteria – Common Core, own SWOT analysis/CPD contract? Do you measure good and weak performance differently?	Criteria or 'gut' feeling? External sources?
How/when do you review your practice?	Regular intervals – weekly, each placement, each term? When something goes wrong/surprises you? Hardly ever? SWOT, feedback, personal crisis/feelings, appraisal, inspection?	Use of vision/criteria?

Appendix 2

Questionnaire to Year 1 students

1. Practitioners (in a previous survey) identified the qualities they look for in students as follows: good people skills, teamwork, using initiative, sensitivity to others. How have you developed these through your placement?
2. How have you found a role for yourself in the work of your setting? You might consider your relationships with the children, the staff routines and procedures.
3. How have you developed your knowledge and understanding of children's learning and development through placement?
4. What activities/experiences have you shared with other practitioners? What have you learned from that?
5. What do you feel you need to find out more about or to get more practice in?
6. How could the University support your efforts?
7. How has your understanding of being a professional in Early Years developed or changed as a result of placement?

Appendix 3

Questions for Focus Group Discussions

1. What were the barriers to reflection – what would have helped you to learn to reflect?
2. How have you developed the skills for reflection?
3. How do you deal with any discomfort or feelings raised by the process?
4. How do you act on your reflections?
5. How did you learn what was significant to reflect on?