

the reflective early years  
Practitioner

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# 10

## Continuing Learning Pathways and Future Reflections

### Chapter overview

In the previous chapter, graduate practitioners' reflective learning journeys through higher educational learning have been explored. This concluding chapter builds upon that chapter through reflective discussion, considering practitioners' continuing learning pathways in the current early years landscape of change. The contribution of their professional knowledge and research in influencing others and implementing change in provision and practice is examined through case studies. The role of practitioners in encouraging children to engage in reflection is also explored.

This chapter will:

- Consider the place of continuing reflective learning for practitioners within the evolving early years landscape.
- Discuss the impact of practitioners' professional learning and work-based research upon provision and practice.
- Examine children's engagement in reflective learning.



### Continuing learning pathways

Continuing to learn throughout a career and demonstrating a commitment to self-improvement or development is a hallmark of being professional and being a member of a profession (Bubb and Earley, 2007). The women graduates in the FD case study on achieving their foundation degree award demonstrated commitment to continuing professional learning and self-improvement, regarding themselves as lifelong learners, as this FD graduate comment shows.

### Reflective practitioner's voice

My learning journey has not been concluded, who knows what my next course will teach me.

Abbott and Hevey (2001) proposed a qualification and training ladder for practitioners. A decade on, through broadening of opportunity and government funding, early years practitioners have climbed up the qualifications ladder and progressed vocationally and academically. The FD graduates in the case study, progressed to the final stage of undergraduate degrees and the professional awards of High Level Teaching Assistant and Early Years Professional, some also qualifying as primary teachers. Many practitioners taking these learning opportunities are women, emerging into a unique, confident, knowledgeable, empowered workforce in the front-line of leading policy into practice in early years settings, children's centres, schools and children's services.

The specialized early years knowledge gained through higher educational learning has given practitioners' professional confidence and authority to lead and influence practice. In the national longitudinal research study of graduate leadership (Hadfield et al., 2011) experienced practitioners through their graduate-level leadership training brought together aspects of their professional knowledge base to theoretical frameworks. The training validated their existing knowledge and practice, generally updated or enhanced their knowledge of child development and children as learners, increased their knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, and developed their experience and practice of working with children under 3 years of age. The integration of existing understandings with new knowledge increased the graduate leaders' level of reflection and criticality within their existing practice and their role in leading the EYFS. Their increased knowledge enabled them to feel more confident in their ability to support, mentor, model practice and appraise staff. They were able to apply their knowledge in leading change in settings, children's centres and service provision, and in leading pedagogy, learning and practice (Hadfield et al., 2011; Hallet, forthcoming).

In influencing change within a school, early years setting or children's centre, the teacher or practitioner influences and leads from a strong foundation of professional knowledge and pedagogy. The professional learning undertaken along the pathway of knowledge comes from a range of key sources of knowledge and events establishing a sound

knowledge base and the professional confidence to share knowledge with others, and lead pedagogy, provision and practice. The learning pathway illustrated in Figure 10.1 and described in the following case study demonstrates this. Grace is a reception teacher in a nursery school; she has led pedagogy for literacy learning through play in her nursery school and beyond, sharing practice within local professional

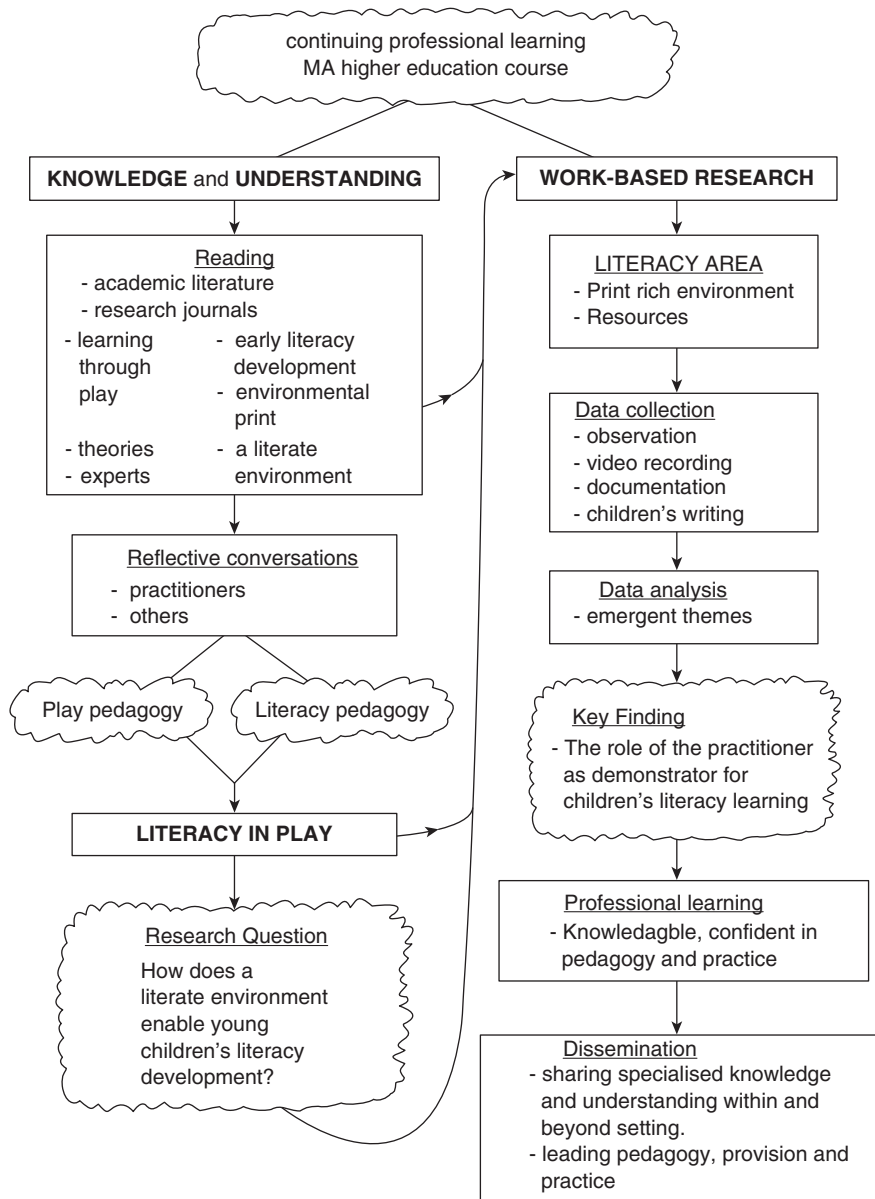


Figure 10.1 My Learning Pathway: literacy area

learning networks. How did she gain the professional knowledge and confidence to do this? The following key sources of knowledge and events gave her specialized professional knowledge, understanding and confidence to influence others, to shape and lead pedagogy, provision and practice.

### *Key sources of knowledge and events*

- Continuing professional development course.
- Reading.
- Reflective conversations.
- Work-based research.

These significant influences in her learning pathway are visually represented in Figure 10.1 and described in the following case study.



### **Case Study: *My learning pathway – literacy area***

Grace develops her professional learning as a part-time student studying a postgraduate degree. The course provides her with knowledge and understanding of early years education and includes a work-based research study. Through reading academic literature and research journals, she became familiar with theories and experts writing about play pedagogy and early literacy development. Through conversations with students who were also practitioners in her class, and the lecturer, she reflected upon the theories and ideas from these writers, Bruce, Brock and Ranklin, Hall, Marsh, Whitehead and Wood, gaining knowledge of play and literacy pedagogies for children's learning and developing her own pedagogy of 'literacy in play' for young children's literacy learning.

Grace was particularly influenced by the work of Hall, who highlighted the importance of a literate environment for young children's emergence of literacy (Gillen and Hall, 2003) through meaningful play contexts and the importance of environmental print for children's early literacy learning (Hallet, 2008a). Literacy contexts such as the home corner, a café, a shop, a garage in the outside area provide playful reading and writing opportunities for young children (Brock and Ranklin, 2008). In Wray et al.'s (1989) research they included environmental print in the home corner, making a playful literate environment with resources such as calendars, recipe books, magazines, newspapers, pens and notebooks for children to engage in meaningful literacy actions. Grace's reading and reflections posed the research question, 'How does a literate environment enable young children's literacy learning?' This formed the basis for a small-scale research study, a case study of a literacy area in her Reception classroom for 4-year-old children to playfully learn in.

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Grace developed a literate environment in the play area, resourcing it with forms, bus and train timetables, tickets, receipts, toy catalogues, holiday brochures, posters, labels, maps, story books, non-fiction books, comics, magazines, writing materials, postcards, birthday cards, pens, paper, envelopes. A video camera on a tripod recorded children's activity in this literacy area in timed intervals.

She encouraged the literacy area to be an interactive space. At the end of each school day, Grace reflected upon the children's achievements, she wrote letters of celebration to the children, which she left on the writing table in the literacy area.

*Dear Steven,*

*Well done for writing your name all by yourself today.*

*Love from Miss Taylor*

When a child found their letter, s/he replied by writing a letter back to Miss Taylor. This written communication provided meaningful contexts, real purpose and audience for their literacy learning.

Grace viewed the videotape footage of activity in the literacy area and began to examine the data. The children were engaging in various writing activities; however they were not interacting with any of the reading materials. Reflecting upon this, Grace began to understand why. By writing letters to the children she was modelling writing; children viewed her as a writer and responded to her demonstrations by writing back to her and writing to each other. She had not demonstrated any reading behaviours for the children to see. Grace began to interact with the reading materials in the literacy area, sharing pictures and print with the children.

After several demonstrations, Grace video-recorded the children's literacy activities. They were still writing to her and each other, but now they were also interacting with the reading materials, looking and pointing at pictures and print and reading to each other. One sustained literacy activity involved three boys leaning over a map spread out on the floor; they were pointing to symbols and print on the map, identifying the school and local road names. Grace's reflective learning through her research highlighted the importance of the adult's role in a literate environment. It was not sufficient to provide a well-resourced literate environment; the key to its value in children's literacy learning was the resource of literate adults demonstrating literacy practices for children to engage in (Gillen and Hall, 2003).

Through her higher educational study, reading academic literature and research journals, reflective conversations and her own research, Grace was now knowledgeably confident about her pedagogy for literacy learning. With this base of theoretical and practice knowledge, she felt confident to share her specialized knowledge and understanding within her nursery

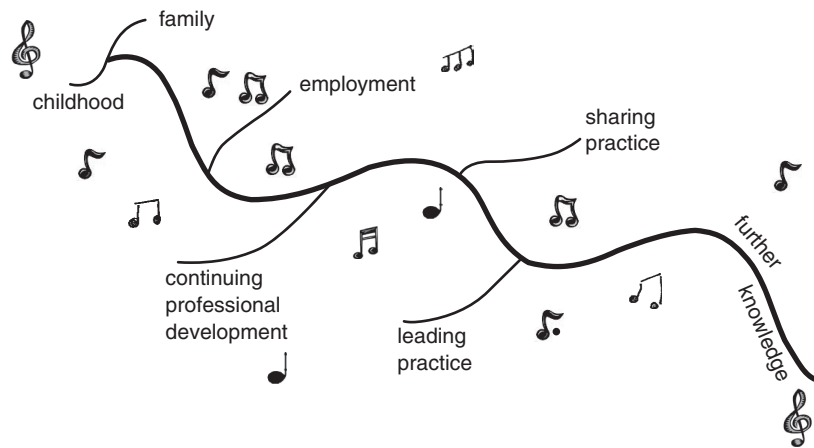


school and beyond in local professional learning networks. She was influencing others by leading pedagogy, provision and practice.

The catalyst for Grace's professional learning was her participation in a higher education course; her research-based postgraduate course enabled her to investigate further her new-found knowledge and understanding, and integrate it within provision and practice.

➔ There is a further case study about children's early literacy learning in Chapter 3.

Figure 10.2 and the next case study show how personal interest and experience can inform further professional learning and career progression. Jennie is a teaching assistant in a primary school; in a piece of reflective writing she shares her learning pathway in developing musical pedagogy for children.



**Figure 10.2** My Learning Pathway: musical interaction



### **Case study: My learning pathway – musical interaction**

#### *Introduction*

Music has always been part of my life; I wish to share with you my musical learning pathway, highlighting influences and events along the way.

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

#### *Family and childhood*

I've been surrounded by music from an early age. I was made to learn to play the piano and clearly remember daily practice, the weekly lessons and the occasional exams which I passed. I resented this at the time but now I'm so grateful that my parents made me persevere. My family held regular family concerts, all of us having learnt to play a few party pieces . . . fond memories. I enjoyed music at school as noted by the teacher in my school report, she encouraged my interest and this led me to attending a music workshop at summer school.

#### *Employment*

Being able to play the piano has helped me get various jobs over the years. I regularly play the piano for assemblies, concerts in school and for the school choir helping children enjoy singing. The choir and the school's drama group joined together and performed the musical show *Oliver!*. I helped with the music and singing, it was hugely successful, very fulfilling for both me and the children.

#### *Continuing professional development and sharing practice*

I attended a workshop about using music for children with special educational needs through interactive musical experiences. This inspired me to make my own musical suitcase, an interactive resource, full of puppets, everyday objects and musical instruments. All the items in the suitcase invited children to creatively make music with me and other children.

I was studying part-time for my undergraduate degree; I shared my learning with the lecturer and student practitioners in my class. The lecturer, impressed with my musical suitcase, asked me to run a workshop at the 'Practitioner Conference' in the summer. This seemed quite daunting to me but I thought I'd have a go. I took my suitcase with me and explained how I used it with children with special educational needs and the benefits they gained from musical interaction. I then let the participants interact with the items in the suitcase and creatively make music. The comments on the evaluation forms were very positive, giving me confidence and leading me to want to do more within the field of lecturing. This is where I see my career heading.

I went on a further short course introducing 'Sing Up', the national website for songs within schools, providing me with ideas and inspiration. I'm due to lead a staff meeting on ways of using music throughout the school day. My colleagues are supportive and I'm positively encouraged to be musical within my everyday work with children. Many strands of the EYFS can be achieved through music.

#### *Leading practice*

The newly appointed head teacher has recognized my musical interest and expertise and is prepared to allow me to take an active part in leading

music throughout the school. At the start of the summer term I will be the music co-ordinator, an exciting if somewhat daunting development.


*Further knowledge*

I wish to find out more about using music for children's holistic learning, so I'm reading literature and journal articles. I'm carrying out a research study as part of my degree that examines ways to encourage practitioners to use music in all areas of the curriculum.

*Conclusion*

I hope I have shown, music is close to my heart, my aim is to inspire children, practitioners and teachers, as I have been inspired, to embrace a subject that is traditionally shied away from.

The case studies have provided examples of practitioners continuing their learning; you may like to reflect upon your continuous professional learning pathway.

 **Questions for reflection: *Reflecting upon my learning pathway***

Reflect upon your learning pathway; consider an aspect of provision or practice, visually record your learning through drawing or writing. The following questions may help you define your pathway of learning:

- What were the key sources of knowledge you encountered?
- How did these sources help you develop, enhance or gain new knowledge?
- What key events enabled you to learn, modify, change or lead provision and practice?
- How has your newly gained or enhanced knowledge influenced your professional learning and development?
- How has your newly gained or enhanced knowledge influenced your work as a practitioner?

## Reflecting with children

As reflection becomes more embedded in early years practitioners' professional behaviour, practitioners are beginning to reflect with

children, encouraging them to reflectively think about the environment in which they learn and about their own learning. Through sustained shared thinking in which adults use open-ended questioning to develop children's cognition, imagination and creativity (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007), children's reflective thinking and learning abilities are developed. Encouraging reflective children within the context of children's rights, citizenship and participation enables children's voices to be listened to by significant adults. Hadfield and Waller (2011) found graduate leaders were listening to children more and respecting their views. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and the Children Acts (1989 and 2004) provide a legal framework for listening to children's views, concerns and feelings, hearing the child's voice in the decision-making process (Nutbrown, 2011a). The ability to reflect provides citizens with an ability to contribute to the local community in which they live and to society in general. To encourage children's reflective ability supports their agency and voice.

The Mosaic Approach as a multi-layered research methodology (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2001) focuses upon children's lived experiences, exploring perceptions of their lives, their interests, priorities and concerns through visual recording and by listening to children. The participatory method allows children to reflect upon lived experience, providing insights into their world. By using cameras, children photograph important aspects of their world; a walking tour around their school or setting with a camera can provide useful insights into children's perspectives of provision, the photographs can provide stimulus for children's reflections.

In the following case study, Amanda, an early years practitioner, undertook a research project involving children in planning and establishing a garden in their pre-school outdoor area, a contrast to the noisier playground. The garden is a place of calm with sensory herbs, shrubs and flowers allowing children the opportunity to sit in a quiet and attractive area. The children call the garden their 'Secret Garden'. Amanda took a group of children on a visual tour of the garden, giving them cameras to photograph important areas of the garden. The photographs were used for children to reflectively talk about, identifying their likes and dislikes by placing them in 'happy face and sad face trays'. Through this reflective activity and discussion, a sense of place within their Secret Garden emerged, as Amanda's writing shows.

 **Case study: *Reflecting upon a sense of place***

Outdoors has to be somewhere children enjoy being so there is a need to create a sense of 'place' (Bilton, 2010: 143). From the initial design phase and beyond, the children have adopted the name 'The Secret Garden' showing they value the garden as a special place to them, confirming a sense of place in their pre-school. When asked why they have named it thus, the children's responses were immediate and unanimous; 'It's got a secret den', whispered Laura, 'and nobody can see in!' added Betty. Frank told me, 'You can do anything in it . . . and I can be invisible in there!' 'And it's just for kids!' Harry urged. Imogen commented, 'It's got a secret den and the flowers are opening and that's a secret because nobody can see it'.

In creating a sense of place, adults should provide a starting point which gives children focus for their play in areas they can call their own (Bilton, 2010). The den, a wood and bamboo structure with a floor of bark-chippings, has proved to be inspirational, the children using it as a role-play area, transporting resources to enhance their play, a place to quietly sit, to eat in and to have story times in.

The children enjoyed being in the new garden, their visual tour of the area allowed them to reflect upon the area and revealed why it is important to them.



**Figure 10.3** Imogen: 'They can't see in!'

*(Continued)*

(Continued)



**Figure 10.4** Frank's 'Imagination door'

Imogen's photograph of the bamboo screens enclosing the garden (Figure 10.3) provoked reflective discussion. Imogen explained 'We can see out, but they (people) can't see in'. Theo disagreed, 'If they get right up close they can look in'. Imogen was determined however, and placed her photograph in the happy face tray; 'I like hiding, I like it because nobody can see me' she said.

Frank photographed the entrance to the den (Figure 10.4) 'I love the den', he said, 'It's got an imagination door . . .'. Asked what he meant by this, Frank explained that each time he went into the den he could be something different: 'Sometimes I can be a dinosaur and sometimes I can be a fighter and I can pretend in it.'

Theo on his visits to the garden likes to rub the leaves of the herbs and then to smell the scent they leave on his hands. During his visual tour, he chose to photograph the herb garden (Figure 10.5). He took the picture, then instinctively held the camera to his face and sniffed it. Theo said with some disappointment, 'It doesn't smell of rosemary . . .'. He then rubbed the rosemary plant with his fingers and then took a photograph of his hand (Figure 10.6). When the photograph of his hand was developed and presented to him, Theo immediately sniffed it, 'It still doesn't smell like rosemary' he complained. He then reflected and took the photograph outside; he rubbed some rosemary leaves against the photograph and sniffed it. 'Now it smells like rosemary!' he enthused.

The involvement of children in designing and participating in the garden gave them a strong sense of place. The use of photographs enabled children to reflect upon why their Secret Garden is a special place for them.



**Figure 10.5** The herb garden



**Figure 10.6** Theo is disappointed his photograph does not smell of rosemary

As photographers the children became reflective commentators, connecting their physical experiences within the environment to their photographs (Clark and Moss, 2001). Through their photographs children have

*(Continued)*

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embodied their way of seeing, situating themselves within their landscape, not just seeing the environment but reflectively exploring the relationship between themselves, the space, place and objects they encounter (Berger, 1990). Such 'sense of place experiences' can impact upon a child's sense of self, conveying important meaning about who they are and who they might become (Wilson, 1997: 191). By listening to the children through their reflections the practitioners gained insight into their perspectives, informing further development of the garden.

In facilitating children to be reflective, the interactions between adults and children are crucial in encouraging children to reflectively learn from their experiences. The importance of active listening and sensitive intervention is highlighted by Siobhan, an early years practitioner, in her work with young children (Hallet, forthcoming):

### Reflective practitioner's voice

For children what reflection encourages is the development of new knowledge, discoveries and new concepts. Through reflection they are able to think about these concepts. If you encourage active learning as well as reflection, then you have two things going on at the same time which is fantastic, in terms of their learning. Whenever I have encouraged children to reflect, I always make time to listen to them. Listening is so important and to value what they say to you, and not just say 'Oh that's very good and well done' but think about taking the questioning further. One example, is when Sayeeda and Lena discovered wet sand wouldn't go through a sieve. So in my questioning, I said 'What are we going to do next? How are we going to problem solve? What are we going to do, to actually see what will go through the sieve?' The girls decided on their own they would change the sand and they would use dry sand. I said 'Wow that is actually an experiment you are carrying out'. So I'm giving them new words as well, which will enable them to reflect upon what they are doing and to discover new things through their learning.

### Questions for reflection: *Reflecting with children*

Consider a context in which you encouraged a child or children to reflect upon their learning.

- Consider what you did to encourage children's reflective learning?
- How did the child or children's reflective abilities develop?
- What did the child or children learn?
- What did you learn as a reflective practitioner?



## Future reflections

At the time of writing, the early years landscape is evolving and changing through reviews of provision. The Allen, Field, Tickell, Marmot, Munro, Nutbrown reviews (2010–12) significantly reshaped the landscape, highlighting early intervention, child development, children's life chances, health and well-being, safeguarding children, being ready for school, curriculum and early years qualifications. In this evolving space, a new landscape of provision in the 'Foundation Years' from pregnancy to age 5 is emerging. The government's vision for the Foundation Years sets out the importance of intervening early, and of different services working together to provide support for parents and children. The government recognizes the importance of skilled professionals and strong leadership across the sector. A highly skilled, graduate-led workforce is crucial for helping children develop well and prepare for school (DfE, 2011b). The government wants to raise the status of professional practitioners working with young children and ensure they have the skills they need for working with young children, their families, practitioners and agencies in an integrated way. The Nutbrown Review of Early Years Qualifications will consider the content of early years qualifications and how they could be strengthened and develop a career progression pathway for those working in the early years (Nutbrown, 2012).

The future is unknown, however, the professional learning and employment opportunities offered over the past decade have provided a strong and knowledgeable workforce. In this new landscape of reform, it is even more important that practitioners are 'reflective early years practitioners' with the ability to review, consider and critically reflect upon policy and practice through dialogue with others from a strong pedagogical foundation of specialized knowledge, early years principles and practice, so the landscape is transformed into an early years environment that enables children, families and practitioners to flourish.



### Summary

The reflective discourse in this chapter, considered practitioners' continuing professional learning through the concept of learning pathways: the contribution of practitioners' professional knowledge in influencing others and change in provision and practice. The role of practitioners in supporting children to engage in reflective

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

learning has been explored. The case studies provided examples of practitioners' continuous professional learning and children's reflective learning. The chapter concluded by reflecting on the future of the evolving early years landscape and considered the importance of reflective early years practitioners in shaping provision and practice within the landscape of reform.

### Further reading

This book provides information about the Mosaic Approach as a research method:  
Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2001) *Listening to Young Children: Using the Mosaic Approach*.  
London: National Children's Bureau.

This book provides information about carrying out work-based research:  
Callan, S. and Reed, M. (eds) (2011) *Work-based Research in the Early Years*. London:  
Sage.