

# Becoming a Reflective Teacher

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**Teaching young children is complex work.** Every day teachers face many challenges—ongoing chores of caretaking and cleanup, planning and providing an engaging curriculum, communicating with families and co-workers, and responding to the ever-growing pressures for outcomes, assessment, and documentation to demonstrate children's learning. These pressures compete for teachers' attention, making it difficult to keep the joy of being with children at the heart of our work. You can turn to the many resources available to learn about guidance techniques or use a published curriculum to help with planning. But to truly share meaningful experiences with children you must learn to become a reflective teacher.

For reflective teachers, their work is an ongoing process of closely observing and studying the significance of children's unfolding activities. Rather than just following preplanned lessons and techniques, reflective teachers consider what

## A reflective teacher . . .

- examines his or her own reactions to children or their actions to understand their source
- is curious about children's play and watches it closely
- documents details of children's conversations and activities
- takes time to study notes and photos to puzzle out what is significant
- eagerly shares stories about children's learning with families and co-workers
- asks co-workers and children's families for their insights
- reads professional literature to learn more
- shows children photos and stories of themselves to hear their views
- changes the environment and materials to encourage new play and learning possibilities

they know about the children in their group and about child development theory to better understand and delight in what happens in the classroom. Reflection allows teachers to make effective, meaningful decisions about how to respond to and plan for children. It keeps them excited about their work.

## A reflective teacher at work

In this section you will see how Deb has become a reflective teacher, inspired by an approach used by New Zealand educators—*learning stories*. The teacher uses a learning story

to document and assess a child's learning and to learn alongside the child (Carr 2001). The story is written to a particular child, describing the details of the child's recent activity and the teacher's interest in and thinking about the significance of the event for the child's learning. Also notice that Deb has invited the child's family to share their knowledge and ideas.

## "I'm Incredible," a Learning Story by Deb Curtis

Jacob, a few weeks ago you came up to me and said, "I'm incredible!" I was delighted and responded that of course you are incredible. I realized that you were trying out your newly discovered incredible imagination. Over the first months of preschool you have been pretending you are someone different every day. It is amazing to watch you become a firefighter or a tiger. You use the dress-up clothes and props to enhance these dramatic moments. Your friends love your new ideas and follow you in this make-believe play.

Sometimes your energy and loud voice make me nervous that someone might get hurt. Last week you found the shovel and decided it was a sword and you were a knight. You ran around the yard with swashbuckling grace, waving your sword. Your friends were excited as they joined you in this drama. I told you to make sure you were just pretending, so you wouldn't hurt anyone. You assured me a few times: "This is real, but I won't hurt anyone."

### My reflections on what your play means

I am thrilled to watch you realize the power of your imagination. You *are* incredible—a smart thinker with a huge vocabulary—so it makes sense that you use these gifts in powerful ways. It is also wonderful that you and your friends are able to share in this play together. You are learning social skills and cooperation. My concern over your big energy is eased by understanding the importance of this play for you. This is the beginning of years of pretend play during which you and your friends will make up many adventures. Dramatic play is an important way to develop language skills and creative thinking that will support all your future learning.

### My thoughts about opportunities your play provides

I'll continue to provide more props to support your dramatic play. I'll observe, document, and create books about your play to read back to you and your friends. I'll keep showing your ideas to the other children so you can help them learn the power of their imaginations! I will continue to learn more about how to help you play in safe ways.

### To Jacob's family

What pretend play does Jacob enjoy at home? I'm eager to hear your stories.

## Think about Deb's reflections

Deb's reflections about her observations of Jacob's actions help her to take his play seriously. She notes her own reactions: delight in Jacob's lively imagination and concern about safety. If she didn't reflect on the larger significance of this play, she might stop it because of her safety concerns. Her descriptions show how she continues to think through her goals and values, attending to children's safety while appreciating and supporting their energetic but valuable activities. She is excited to ask Jacob's family's to tell her what they have seen him do at home. The information they provide will expand her understanding of Jacob and lead to meaningful two-way information sharing between home and school.

## Reflective teaching is not a new idea

John Dewey, considered the father of modern education, wrote about reflective teaching over a century ago. Dewey (1910, 1916) believed that teachers should take time to reflect on their observations, knowledge, and experience so that they can effectively nurture each child's learning. In the example, Deb reflects on her observations of Jacob so that she can thoughtfully plan her next steps in teaching and learning. Dewey suggested that the most effective teachers approach their reflection with a sense of wonder, curiosity, and excitement—feelings that clearly come through in Deb's learning story about Jacob.

## Each teaching situation is unique

Donald Schön was an educational theorist who built on Dewey's work. Schön (1983) observed that effective teachers are not just reflective, but are able to reflect quickly and naturally in-the-moment as they work with children. He called this *reflection-in-action*. He believed that reflection-in-action



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is important because each child and teaching situation is unique. No one strategy or technique works for all teachers, with all children, or in all circumstances. Instead, teaching is complicated work and requires constant, sensitive, skillful, and *reflective* decision making.

### Using a “thinking lens” for reflection-in-action

It is one thing to talk about reflective teaching, but quite another to practice it. Teachers need a disciplined way to analyze the events as they happen in the classroom. The “thinking lens” is a list of questions that teachers can ask themselves as they think over their day or discuss observation notes and photos with co-workers and families. Teachers can think about classroom events after they have occurred as a way to practice using these kinds of questions. Once teachers learn the kinds of questions that help them make effective decisions, their answers can guide their responses on the spot as classroom events unfold each day.

### Reflective teaching in an age of standards

The emphasis on higher standards in our profession carries the goal of improved quality. Becoming a reflective teacher can help you keep track of what you are doing and what each child is learning and, in turn, help children meet the early learning standards. Reflective teaching will also

help you slow down and take time to notice and enjoy the amazing things children do each day and the important ways you contribute to their learning.

Many teachers feel stress due to the complexity of their work and turn to prescribed, quick-fix approaches to meet the requirements. Instead, teachers can advocate for the support and resources they need to become reflective teachers. Reflection can be seen as a responsibility, but it can also be viewed as a right of early childhood teachers. Quality programs will invest in teachers’ abilities to be reflective, thoughtful decision makers.

As rising early learning standards bring changes, teachers deserve to be seen as active collaborators, not compliant observers in the change process. You have the right to time, support, and opportunities for ongoing reflection, enjoyment, and dialogue in your work. You deserve this and so do the children.

#### REFERENCES

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- Schön, D.A. 1983. *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.

# Thinking Lens

Here are six areas to consider (with sample questions) to get started in using a thinking lens to become a more reflective teacher.

## 1. Know yourself.

What captures my attention as the children engage, explore, and talk with each other and with me?  
What delights me as I watch and listen?  
How might my background and values influence how I respond to the children?

## 2. Find the details that touch your heart and mind.

What do I notice in the children's faces and actions?  
Where do I see examples of children's strengths and abilities?  
What are the children learning from this experience?

## 3. Seek the child's perspective.

What is the child drawn to and excited about?  
What might the child be trying to accomplish?  
Why might the child be talking to and playing with others this way?  
What ideas might the child be exploring?

## 4. Examine the physical and social-emotional environment.

How do schedules, routines, the physical space, and materials support or limit the children's play?  
What changes or additions to the space or materials would help to strengthen children's relationships?  
How do schedules and routines influence this experience?

## 5. Explore multiple points of view.

How might the child's culture and family background be influencing this situation?  
What questions could I ask the child's family?  
What other perspectives should I consider?  
What child development or early learning theories apply to this experience?  
How does this child's play (or other activity) demonstrate desired early learning outcomes or standards?

## 6. Consider opportunities and possibilities for next steps.

What values, philosophy, and desired outcomes do I want to influence my response?  
What new or existing relationships could be strengthened?  
Which learning goals could be addressed?  
What other materials and activities could be offered to build on this experience?  
What new vocabulary can teachers introduce?

The Thinking Lens is adapted, with permission, from M. Carter and D. Curtis, *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improvising in Your Center* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf, 2009), 359.

**Note:** This is an expanded version of the article that appeared in Volume 3, Number 4 of *Teaching Young Children*. This version features more questions in the Thinking Lens tool above.