Talking about practice:
Self-assessment, reflective practice and quality improvement processes

Conversation with Michelle Gujer

This video is part of the Talking about practice series (TAPS), designed to support discussion and reflection about the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the links with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The series is intended to support conversations and discussions between educators as they reflect on their practice and identify ‘what next?’ actions as a result of their discussions. The video is in three parts and includes footage of practice that illustrates parts of the interview.

Introduction

The NQS highlights the importance of using self-assessment and reflection to evaluate current practices, with the aim of having an informed picture of the quality of children’s and families’ experiences in the service. The process of self-assessment and reflection helps to identify both strengths and areas that need improvement (ACECQA 2012, Guide to developing a Quality Improvement Plan, p. 5).

In this TAPS, the coordinator of a large community-based childcare centre shares her ideas about self-assessment and reflection, how the centre supports these processes and some of the outcomes from this professional activity.

Some questions follow for each segment to guide your discussion and to prompt deeper thinking about the ideas raised. You will think of other questions. Be guided by the interests of the people you are using the TAPS with. It is important to adapt the key messages in this TAPS to your context—the place and the people you work with—and to think about how the ideas and practices in the TAPS apply to your setting.

And remember that one small step can be the beginning of bigger changes.

Self-assessment and reflection on all aspects of practice contribute most effectively to quality improvement when:

- you include different perspectives—those of staff, children, families, and the committee of management
- everyone involved speaks honestly about current practice and is open to new possibilities and making changes
- there is a professional climate of respect for everyone’s ideas
- you ask ‘hard’ questions—for example, ‘Why do we always do it this way?’ ‘Who is advantaged by this way of working and who is disadvantaged?’ ‘Is this practice in children’s best interests?’
- there is a continuous, embedded cycle of assessment, review and reflection on practice
- you plan practical strategies or actions to improve the quality areas that need improvement.

The interview and vignettes focus on the topic as it applies to a centre-based service. The main ideas in the TAPS and in this support document apply equally to family day care settings. The topics of the vignettes that illustrate this TAPS—orientation and transitions for children and families, use of dummies, organisation of the lunch routine and excursions—are likely to be of interest to educators. If this occurs, you may need to guide participants back to the focus (self-assessment and reflective practice). The vignettes can be used at another time to reflect on these other topics.
Segment 1: What do we mean by self-assessment and reflective practice?

Discuss the question ‘What do the terms “self-assessment” and “reflective practice” mean to you?’ before watching the video. Note your answers and compare them later with the discussion of these terms in the video.

Michelle says that what they are aiming for in the centre is to encourage reflection and discussion about practice as part of everyday practice. What insights do you get from watching and listening to this segment about how to make that happen? How can you involve people other than educators in the service community in critical reflection?

What are some obstacles, and what can you do about them? What about the obstacle of time? What can be done to free more time for self-assessment and critical reflection? How might you bring about a commitment on the part of educators to sit and talk about their practice?

What are the features of the room leaders’ meeting in the vignette that make it a good example of collective self-assessment and critical reflection? What does Michelle do to promote discussion and sharing of different perspectives? The choice of areas of practice to assess and reflect on is important. Why is the topic of orientation and transitions a good one for the room leaders to focus on?

Segment 2: Going deeper into the process of self-assessment

Reflect on the different ways you have undertaken self-assessment in your service:

- Who was involved? Why?
- What was the purpose?
- What strengths did you identify from your assessment and reflection?
- What quality areas did you identify that needed to improve?
- What strategies or actions did you plan and/or implement to address the areas for improvement?

Michelle mentions that creating a culture of reflection requires staff feeling safe and that it’s okay to ask questions. How do you think you could go about doing that or how has it happened in your workplace?

What are the challenges for your service in embedding self-assessment and reflective practice into everyday practice? How might you overcome these challenges? Who or what might help you to do this?

If you work as an educator or coordination unit staff member in family day care, how can you meet the challenge of encouraging self-assessment and reflection in educators who work mostly alone? What are the ways that you encourage reflection and self-assessment of your work as an educator?

One category of critical reflection is linking practices with big ideas in the EYLF and with Elements and Standards in the NQS. The process can work both ways—either beginning with a particular practice or area of practice (such as lunchtime) and considering what parts of the EYLF or NQS it links to; or alternatively you can start with one idea in the NQS or EYLF and consider what practices in your service illustrate it or work against it. What are some ways to encourage educators to link practices and proposed changes in practices to the NQS and the EYLF?

Why is this important? What more could you do?

Michelle spoke about the need to allow time for change and to respect differences in educators—that some might embrace change quickly and easily and others may take more time. Does this difference exist among you and your colleagues? If so, how is it taken into account?
The first vignette shows a room meeting that takes place as children are resting and sleeping. How might this work in your setting?

Michelle mentions that each educator keeps a notebook. Why is this important, and how might it contribute to self-assessment and critical reflection?

The second vignette in this segment shows a way of offering lunch that Michelle says was the result of focusing directly on what is in the children’s best interests.

What stands out for you in the vignette?

How does this lunchtime link with NQS or EYLF?

What are some of the issues the educators may have reflected on in making the change to a progressive lunch routine?

What can you learn from the vignette about how reflection can change practice?

Segment 3: Outcomes from self-assessment, reflective practice and taking action

Self-assessment, reflective practice and taking action support improved outcomes for children, families and educators.

Can you identify some improved outcomes for children, families and educators from undertaking self-assessment and taking action in your service?

What are some of the key ideas about establishing self-assessment and reflective practice that Michelle identified?

For example, she mentions being open and honest with each other. What else is required?

What are some of the changes you’ve faced in trying to establish a culture of enquiry and professional learning in your service?

How do you or can you encourage reflection and self-assessment at all levels—the management committee, leaders, educators, families and children?

Michelle talks about why educators reflect with children. What are the main ideas in the NQS and the EYLF that link to and promote reflecting with children?

What do you think Michelle means when she says ‘children are experts in their own world’? Is that view evident in your own work and that of your service? What is or would be the evidence that you and your service hold that view?

How do you gain children’s perspectives or opinions on matters that concern them?

How do you gain families’ perspectives on matters that concern them?

What new or additional strategies could you use to gain different perspectives on practice as part of self-assessment processes?

In the vignette we see young children and two educators on one of their regular walks in the local community. How did
reflective practice support educators to plan for children’s active participation in their community? What actions does Michelle mention that occurred as a result of critical reflection about children’s connections with the local community?
The educator asks a lot of questions of the children. Discuss the role of questions in encouraging critical reflection—with adults, and with children.
What might educators and children reflect on after this excursion?

**In conclusion** ...

Over the course of the interview Michelle identified a number of characteristics and qualities needed by individuals that are essential for self-assessment and critical reflection, as well some workplace characteristics. She emphasises empowering people and demonstrating that you value creative thinking and solutions. How can you nurture those characteristics and qualities in yourself and in your workplace?

What processes are in place to support self-assessment and reflective practice by individuals, teams and the staff as a whole? How could these processes be adapted to work in family day care, and what new processes could be put in place?

Research has identified two different types of reflection:
- reflection in practice
- reflection on practice.

What is the difference between these types of reflection? Why is it helpful to use both?

How can self-assessment and critical reflection be effective forms of professional learning?

What are some strategies to support self-assessment and reflection in addition to those that Michelle has identified? For example, some educators keep a personal reflective diary or journal where they write their thoughts, ask questions of themselves and plan actions. A room team can keep a collective reflective journal for the same purpose.

Self-assessment and reflective practice are central to the development of your Quality Improvement Plan. Without such processes it is difficult to gain a clear, honest picture of what you do well and the areas that need improvement or that can be extended to an even higher level of quality.

The first principle underpinning the National Quality Framework is that ‘The rights and best interests of the child are paramount’ (ACECQA 2011, Guide to the NQS, p. 7). Keeping this principle at the forefront each time a service or an individual educator reflects on their practice reminds us of the reason for our commitment to ongoing quality improvement processes.

Remember that self-assessment and reflection are worthwhile only if they lead to action.

**Resources**

Following are some additional resources developed by ECA for supporting self-assessment and reflective practice. They are available to download from: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au.

- The EYLF PLP, Thinking about practice: Working with the Early Years Learning Framework.
- The EYLF PLP e-Newsletter No.17, 2011, Conversations.
- The NQS PLP e-Newsletter No. 27, 2012, Getting ready for the NQS.

**References**


**Acknowledgement**

Thank you to Michelle Gujer and the staff at The Harbour Family and Children’s Centre, Gowrie Victoria for their support for the production of this TAPS. A commitment to promoting a ‘lively culture of professional enquiry’ (ACECQA 2011, Guide to the NQS, p. 173) in the centre helps them to build a professional learning community.