

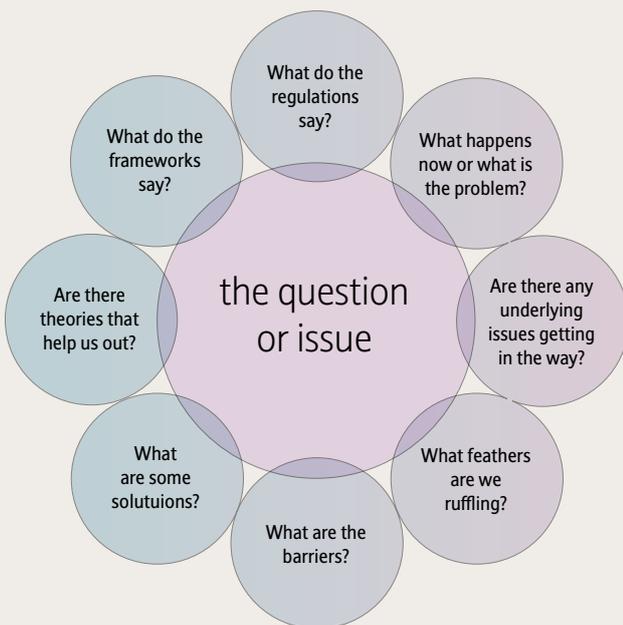
GETTING PRACTICAL ABOUT REFLECTION PART 2

Effective critical reflection requires several key elements to be in place. Firstly, educators need to understand what reflection is. Far from being navel-gazing, it is a powerful process that asks professionals to examine themselves and their practice in order to better engage children and their families within the learning community.

Secondly, educators need to find willing collaborators. While reflection can be undertaken by one's self, it's far more helpful when we can do it with our work colleagues. We can then think through ideas and issues together, and through genuine effort find answers to questions, and ultimately improve the quality of the service.

The third and perhaps the most helpful element for those beginning in the practice of reflection is knowledge of techniques – a couple of easy-to-use tools. Some reflection tools have been identified in other articles in this publication. Without doubt, educators have done some of their own investigations or sourced different possibilities from their colleagues.

This article outlines in detail one reflection tool and showcases its application to a real issue faced by a group of educators in a long day care setting. The reflection tool is a combination of approaches mostly influenced by learning circles work (Nobel, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005, p. 22), but essentially uses a questioning approach to examine what is currently happening, identify issues or barriers that are in the way of change, and uncover new ideas to solve the problem.



Before we look at this team's reflection process it's helpful to know some of their context. The 120-place centre is located in a remote community, which brings many challenges. The most significant challenge is the difficulty in recruiting appropriately experienced and qualified staff and the lack of access to professional support and resources. Despite this, the team have embraced the frameworks and have recently completed their Quality Improvement Plan. It was through this process that routines around lunch and rest time were identified as needing improvement. It was clear that educators, children and families alike found the process stressful and difficult to manage, and finding a way forward proved difficult – everyone knew it should be different, but no one was clear about what the problems really were, how it ought to look, or what new approach might work. What comes next is some of the conversations that took place using the question or issue tool pictured with the room staff team for the three-to-five-year age group.

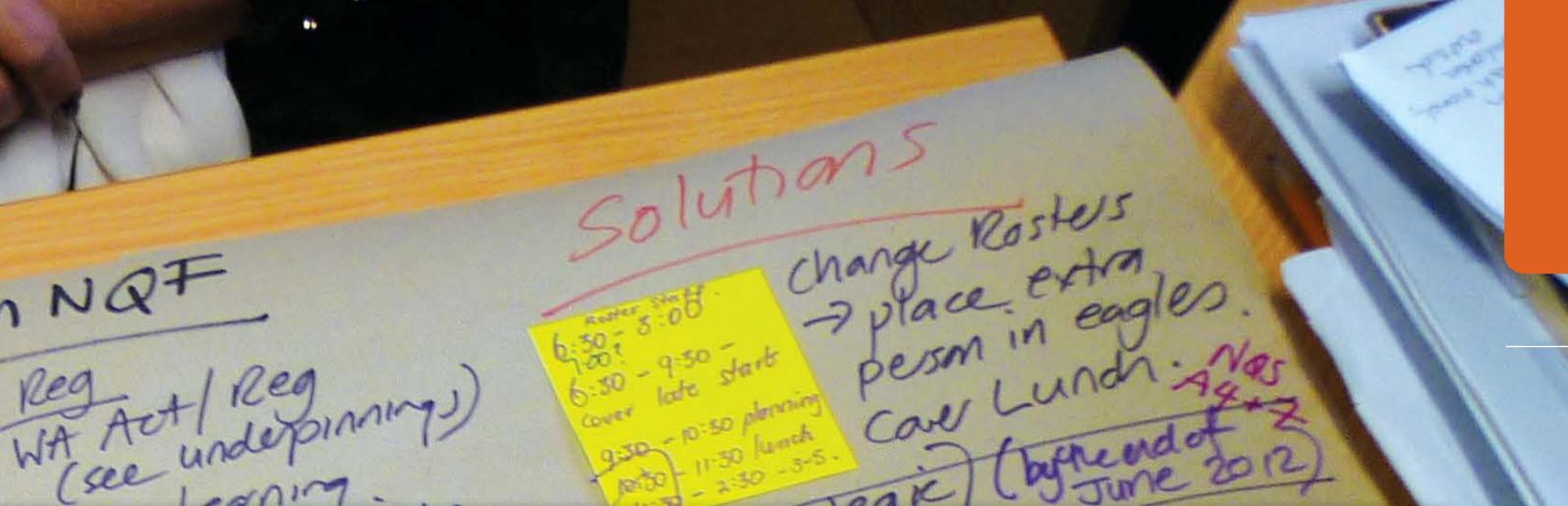
Before we got started, we gathered our equipment – a large piece of paper the size of the table we were working at (try sticking two or three easel-size pieces of paper together), different coloured texts and sticky notes. We then wrote the question in the middle of the paper and answered each question in different colours around the paper.

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First the question ... this took some time in itself. Taking time to frame the question in a way that captures the issues and leads to solutions is an important step.

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As we got going we established some "rules", or ways of working together, mostly drawn from the ECA Code of Ethics – listen to each other, don't dismiss any ideas as ridiculous, and think outside the square or underneath it or beside it!! We began in the obvious place ...



What is happening now – or what is the problem?

Here we listed what was happening. From children getting up and down from their chairs at lunch, through to difficulties in getting some children to sleep and keeping other children who didn't sleep occupied. We tried to see problems from our own and others' perspectives. It's here we considered that children might be bored or might not know what to do during transitions. We honestly stated how stressful the process was and how people dreaded that part of the day. These conversations lead to the next question ...

What do the regulations say? What does the NQS say? What do the frameworks say?

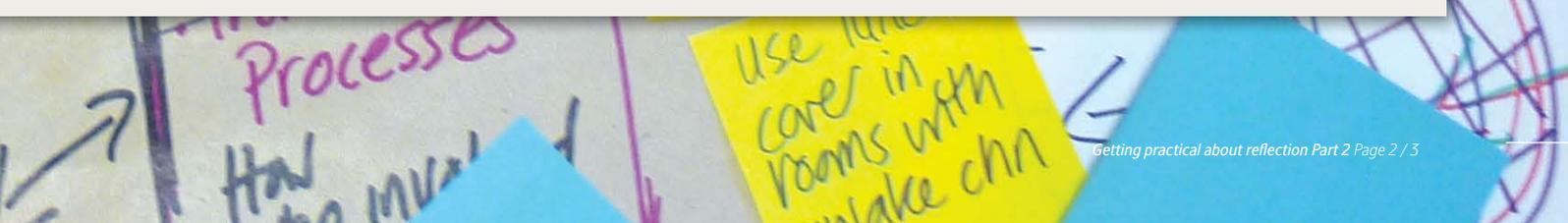
If we are so dissatisfied with what is happening now, then how could it be in the future? Are there any guidelines about what this time should look like? Yes there are – there are a number of references to these times in our key documents. Statements like this from *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)*, make it very clear that all parts of the day are to be included as part of the curriculum and should enrich and enable children's learning.

Curriculum encompasses all the interactions, experiences, routines and events – planned and unplanned – that occur in an environment designed to foster children's learning and development. (DEEWR 2009, p. 9).

We wrote some of the words we found on the paper. If the guiding documents are clear, and there are theories to support this thinking, then we were led to the next question ...

Are there any underlying issues getting in the way?

Here's where we listed the things that seemed to be getting in the way – one thing we identified was the staff's desire to get the routine over and done with efficiently. We came back to this section throughout our deliberation as we uncovered aspects that appeared to be barriers. A policy of no outside play between 10am and 2pm was a barrier to expanding our routine to include time outside. Key staff were absent at important transition times due to the way scheduled breaks were rostered. There were also important pedagogical barriers, which deemed transition time to be less about learning than at other times of the day. Which naturally took us to ... ▶





What feathers are we ruffling or what ideas are we challenging?

This question proved to be a bit sensitive and at times awkward (this is where a facilitator or person external to the teams can be very useful). We reminded ourselves that we agreed to be honest with each other and that it was about the children not about ourselves.

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We identified some of the practices that occurred simply because they were better for the adults, and we agreed that some things were done because they had always been done that way.

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Bravely, someone said that she didn't see this time as a learning time, but now she could see opportunities for learning. With a decent list of issues and ideas that needed challenging, we move into solutions.

What are some solutions?

Turning our attention to solutions at first seemed easy, but having taken the time to explore the issue through the reflective process, the search for solutions became more complex and were not simply about rearranging timetables. We came up with a number of ideas ranging from shifting to an inside-outside approach in the lead up to lunch and immediately after, to ensure children and staff were more relaxed, to encouraging educators to sit with the children at lunch to share in conversations. We explored strategies to involve children in a greater amount of the set-up and clean-up activities before and after lunch. We chose two or three strategies to work on, and agreed to start the next day. As well as these practical strategies the team decided that they needed to spend some time talking about the nature of children's learning, their expectations of children and what made up a rich curriculum. Ideas that before now they thought they all agreed upon.

This process demonstrates how reflective practice techniques can be used not only to solve problems, but also to understand and gain insight into the way we work and what we believe. Simply changing things here and there may not result in understanding. Reflective practice takes us further – it asks us to think and ultimately makes us better educators.

REFERENCES

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, ACT.

Nobel, K., Macfarlane, K., & Cartmel, J. (2005), *Circles of Change: Challenging orthodoxy in practitioner supervision*, Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest, NSW. ●

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