

VU LEARNING HUB

vulearninghub.xyz

HIGHLIGHTED HANDOUT

EDUA406

Reflective Practices and Critical Thinking
in Early Years

EDUA406 by VU Learning HUB

Prepared for VU students • Free study resources

<https://vulearninghub.xyz>

EDUA406

Reflective Practices and Critical Thinking in Early Years

Lecture Handouts

Prepared for the students of Virtual University of Pakistan

Table of Contents

Placeholder for table of contents	0
-----------------------------------	---

1. What Is Reflective Practice?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define reflective practice in teaching
- Explain why reflection matters in early years
- Distinguish reflection from mere thinking

Reflective practice is the deliberate, systematic thinking teachers do about their teaching - examining what happened in the classroom, why it happened, and how to improve. Donald Schon distinguished **reflection-in-action** (thinking on your feet mid-lesson - noticing children are restless and switching to a movement activity) from **reflection-on-action** (reviewing after the lesson - journaling why the art activity failed). Both turn experience into professional learning; without reflection, teachers repeat the same year twenty times instead of growing through twenty years.

In **early years** (ages 3-8), reflection is especially vital because young children cannot always articulate their needs - the teacher must read behavior as communication. A child throwing blocks may be expressing frustration, overstimulation or a need for big-body play; only a reflective teacher asks 'what is this behavior telling me?' instead of just punishing. Reflective early-years educators continuously examine their **beliefs about children** (competent vs. empty vessels), because beliefs drive practice.

Reflective practitioner

A teacher who systematically questions her own assumptions, examines evidence from her classroom, and modifies practice accordingly - teaching as inquiry, not just technique.

SECTION SUMMARY

Reflective practice = deliberate examination of teaching to improve it. Schon: in-action (during) and on-action (after). In early years, reflection decodes what children's behavior communicates.

2. Models of Reflection

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain Gibbs' reflective cycle
- Explain Kolb's experiential learning cycle
- Apply Brookfield's four lenses

Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988) - six stages: **Description** (what happened?), **Feelings** (what did I feel?), **Evaluation** (what worked/didn't?), **Analysis** (why?), **Conclusion** (what did I learn?), **Action plan** (what will I do next time?). It is the most used model in teacher training because its questions scaffold journal writing. Example: 'The circle-time story flopped (description); I felt

SECTION SUMMARY

Journals, peer observation, video, work analysis and critical incidents are the toolkit. Push entries from descriptive to dialogic to critical - that progression is where growth happens.

4. Critical Thinking: Concepts**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- Define critical thinking
- Explain Bloom's taxonomy (revised)
- Distinguish critical from creative thinking

Critical thinking is disciplined, self-directed thinking that analyzes, evaluates and reconstructs ideas - asking for evidence, spotting assumptions, considering alternatives. For young children this does not mean formal logic; it means **thinking about thinking**: 'How do you know?', 'What else could we try?', 'What would happen if...?' The **revised Bloom's taxonomy** (Anderson & Krathwohl) orders cognition: Remember -> Understand -> **Apply -> Analyze -> Evaluate -> Create** - the top three are higher-order thinking (HOT).

Early-years activities mapped to HOT: **Analyze** - sorting leaves by attributes, comparing two story endings; **Evaluate** - 'which tower design was strongest? why?'; **Create** - building, storytelling, inventing games. **Creative thinking** (generating novel ideas) and **critical thinking** (judging ideas) are partners: brainstorming generates, criteria evaluate. Both beat rote memorization - a child who can recite numbers but not use them to solve a sharing problem has learned little of value.

Higher-order thinking (HOT)

Cognitive work at Bloom's Apply/Analyze/Evaluate/Create levels - manipulating ideas, not merely recalling them.

SECTION SUMMARY

Critical thinking = evidence-seeking, assumption-testing thought. Bloom's top three levels (analyze, evaluate, create) define higher-order thinking - achievable in early years through sorting, judging and making.

5. Developing Critical Thinking in Young Children

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Use questioning to provoke thinking
- Design inquiry-based activities
- Create a thinking-friendly classroom culture

Questioning is the teacher's sharpest tool: replace 'what color is this?' (closed, recall) with **open-ended questions** - 'What do you notice?', 'How are these the same/different?', 'What makes you think so?', 'What could we do if...?' Use **wait time** (3-5 seconds of silence after asking - Rowe's research shows it doubles response quality) and follow-ups ('tell me more'). **Socratic habits** for five-year-olds: asking for reasons ('why do you think the plant needs water?') and considering viewpoints ('how do you think Sara felt?').

Inquiry-based learning: start from children's questions ('where does rain go?'), investigate together (pour water on soil/sand/stone), document findings (drawings, charts), and revisit. The **project approach** (Katz) lets a class study 'the bakery' or 'insects' for weeks - visiting, interviewing, representing. Culture matters more than activities: a classroom where mistakes are celebrated ('oops - what did we learn?'), where children's theories are taken seriously, and where the teacher says 'I don't know - let's find out' grows thinkers.

■ VERY IMPORTANT

Wait time is the highest-leverage micro-skill in this course: 3-5 seconds of silence after a question dramatically improves the length and quality of children's answers. Examiners love it.

SECTION SUMMARY

Open questions + wait time + follow-ups = thinking. Inquiry projects and a mistake-friendly culture turn questioning from a technique into a classroom way of life.

6. Observation and Documentation

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain observation as reflective data
- Use learning stories and portfolios
- Document thinking, not just products

You cannot reflect on what you did not notice. **Systematic observation** - anecdotal records, running records, checklists, event sampling - gives reflection its raw material. The Reggio Emilia tradition treats **documentation** (photos, transcripts, work samples with teacher commentary) as visible listening: panels on the wall show children their own thinking and show parents what learning looks like.

Learning stories (Carr): narrative assessments capturing a child's dispositions - curiosity, perseverance, collaboration - in a real moment, with 'what next?' planning. **Portfolios** collect work over time to show growth. Document **process over product**: photograph the block tower's three collapses and the child's redesign, not just the finished tower - the thinking is the learning. Reviewing documentation in team meetings is collective reflection that improves curriculum.

SECTION SUMMARY

Observation feeds reflection; documentation makes learning visible. Learning stories and portfolios capture dispositions and growth - document the struggle, not just the product.

7. Reflecting on Behavior and Guidance

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Reframe behavior as communication
- Apply reflective problem-solving to challenges
- Use positive guidance strategies

The reflective teacher's first question about misbehavior is never 'how do I stop this?' but **'what is this child communicating?'** - hunger, fatigue, frustration, unmet need for movement, a task too hard or too easy, or echoes of home stress. **Functional thinking**: note when/where/with whom the behavior occurs (ABC: antecedent-behavior-consequence) and test hypotheses by changing the environment before 'fixing' the child.

Positive guidance toolkit: **redesign the environment** (more space, clearer zones, accessible materials), **teach the missing skill** (words for feelings, how to join play), **offer choices** ('paint or clay?'), **natural/logical consequences** (spilled water -> wipe it), **calm-down support** (co-regulation before reasoning - an upset brain cannot learn), and **restorative conversations** ('what happened? who was affected? how do we make it right?'). Reflect afterward: did my response teach, or just punish? Shaming and corporal punishment - still present in some Pakistani schools - are ethically indefensible and developmentally harmful.

SECTION SUMMARY

Behavior is communication: analyze ABC, change the environment, teach the skill. Guide positively and restoratively; reflect on whether your response taught something.

8. Reflecting on Curriculum and Pedagogy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Evaluate curriculum decisions reflectively
- Balance child-led and teacher-led learning
- Reflect on play-based pedagogy

Reflective curriculum questions: **Is it developmentally appropriate?** (not pushing formal writing at age 3), **culturally relevant?** (stories, materials reflecting Pakistani children's lives - not only imported content), **inclusive?** (every child can participate and see themselves), and **balanced?** (child-initiated play + teacher-guided inquiry + direct teaching of skills like phonics). Neither pure free play nor desk-bound drilling serves children; the evidence favors **playful learning with intentional teaching**.

Reflect on **transitions** (arrival, cleanup, lining up - where most chaos lives: are my routines teaching independence or just compliance?), on **the environment as third teacher** (Reggio: is the room beautiful, orderly, inviting investigation?), and on **assessment** (am I assessing to label or to teach better?). Pakistani ECE classrooms often face large classes and scarce materials - reflection then focuses on low-cost ingenuity: bottle caps for counting, outdoor loose parts, peer tutoring.

SECTION SUMMARY

Reflect on appropriateness, cultural relevance, inclusion and balance. The environment teaches; transitions reveal routines' quality; assessment should serve teaching.

9. Collaborative Reflection and Professional Growth

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Explain professional learning communities
- Give and receive feedback well
- Plan continuous professional development

Reflection need not be solitary. **Professional learning communities (PLCs)**: teachers meeting regularly to examine student work, try strategies and hold each other accountable - research links strong PLCs to real learning gains. **Lesson study** (Japanese model): a team plans one lesson, one teaches while others observe children's thinking, then all debrief and reteach - deep, concrete professional learning.

Feedback rules: focus on **children's learning evidence** ('when you asked X, three children...'), be specific and non-judgmental, balance strengths with one stretch goal. Build a **professional development plan**: yearly goals ('improve open-ended questioning'), actions (peer observations, one course), evidence (journal excerpts, videos). In Pakistan's ECE sector - where formal training is uneven - self-directed reflective growth, supported by school leadership that

protects time for it, is the realistic path to quality.

SECTION SUMMARY

PLCs and lesson study make reflection collective and concrete. Feedback targets learning evidence; a personal development plan turns reflection into a career habit.

10. Ethics, Bias and the Reflective Teacher

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Surface hidden biases through reflection
- Explain ethical responsibilities in ECE
- Practice culturally responsive reflection

Every teacher carries **biases** - about gender ('boys are naughty'), class, language (looking down on mother-tongue speakers), ability. Reflection surfaces them: 'Do I call on boys more? Do I expect less from the quiet child? Whose festivals appear on my walls?' **Culturally responsive teaching** connects curriculum to children's home cultures while holding high expectations for all - especially vital in Pakistan's multilingual classrooms where Urdu-medium children meet English expectations. 

Ethical core: **do no harm** (physical and emotional safety first), **confidentiality** (children's disclosures and family information stay private), **honesty with families** (realistic, kind reporting of difficulties), and **advocacy** (speaking up when policies hurt children - e.g. developmentally inappropriate testing). The reflective teacher regularly asks Brookfield's critical question: 'Whose interests are served by my practice?' - and is willing to change the answer.

■ VERY IMPORTANT

Bias-recognition scenarios are favorite exam items: a vignette shows a teacher favoring some children; you must name the bias, explain its harm, and propose reflective correctives.

SECTION SUMMARY

Reflection exposes bias and enforces ethics: safety, confidentiality, honesty with families, advocacy. Ask whose interests your practice serves - and act on the answer.

11. Exam Pointers

High-yield topics

- Schon: reflection-in-action vs reflection-on-action; definition of reflective practitioner.

- Gibbs' six stages in order; Kolb's cycle; Brookfield's four lenses.
- Hatton and Smith's three journal levels (descriptive/dialogic/critical) - with example entries.
- Revised Bloom's taxonomy order; HOT examples for ages 3-8.
- Questioning: open vs closed questions; wait time (3-5 sec); follow-up moves.
- Observation methods; Reggio documentation; learning stories (Carr).
- Behavior as communication; ABC analysis; positive guidance vs punishment.
- Vygotsky's play quote; developmentally appropriate practice; environment as third teacher.
- Baumrind-style warmth/demandingness applied to teaching style; bias scenarios.
- PLCs and lesson study as collaborative reflection.

SECTION SUMMARY

Answer every question as: concept -> early-years example -> teacher action. The paper rewards applied reflection, not memorized definitions alone.