THE EFFECTS OF REGULAR REFLECTIVE WRITING ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS EFFECTIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

By

SHERYL THIRD

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The Effects of Regular Reflective Writing

ABSTRACT

As the profession of early childhood education itself is experiencing transformation, educators too are looking to redefine or transform their practice. This research paper examines reflective practice through the lens of Early Childhood Educators while investigating the theory of reflection and reflective writing from a psychological, social, spiritual and educational context. The research suggests there is evidence that writing can influence the ability of educators to elevate their reflective practice skills in their daily work with children, families and colleagues. Reflective writing requires Early Childhood Educators to examine and hold their thinking in place in order to dialogue and reflect on their practice. As Early Childhood Educators begin their journey through the reflective process, writing can act as a catalyst to embrace new skills and pedagogical practices.
Introduction

In a climate of change and transformation in Ontario for Early Childhood Educators there is a motivation by employers, funding agents and the profession’s self-regulating body, the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) to engage their employees, Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE), in the practice of reflection.

I was drawn to this particular topic of personal and professional development as I have undergone my own transformative experience of reflection throughout my final year of the Masters of Arts in Integrated Studies program at Athabasca University. It occurred to me that one needed to practice reflection in order to teach it. It is this parallel lens that I believe gives credence to my ability to advocate that RECE’s develop the skills and disposition necessary to be reflective practitioners. I have witnessed the desire for Early Childhood Educators to become more reflective in their own thinking and work. It seemed to me that the practice of writing for reflection may act as the catalyst needed for educators to become more observant in their practice and in turn become more reflective practitioners. Having said this there is hesitancy on the part of educators to embrace any new practice. This is the result of months of sweeping changes at all levels, including the governmental oversight of early childhood education. Child care is now the responsibility of the Ministry of Education; this has left some educators feeling overwhelmed and skeptical of any perceived “new” practice or change.

Throughout the past several years much conversation and professional literature that has been produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education supports the practice of
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reflection and writing for reflection. For example, more than eight years ago the Ministry of Education in their document *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings* (2007) defined reflective practice as:

a systematic, reflective, collaborative process used by Early Childhood Educators to plan, evaluate, make decisions and create and implement change through consideration of relevant literature, current practice learning environments, observations of children’s development, behaviour, social interactions, learning and knowledge of families. (p. 19)

In my own work as a post-secondary professor and trainer, it has been my experience there is a need for educators to see that in general they are already practicing elements of reflection, and it is in the intentionality of the practice of writing that will allow for the transformation in their thinking and practice. Having said this there has traditionally been a low expectation for Early Childhood Educators to write. This is changing, but the comfort level is varied, as educators may not naturally be reflective and the motivation and time to contribute to this practice are often anecdotally noted as barriers. (Verbal communication by Educators during training on Reflective Practice, Fall 2014)

In researching what some Educators might consider the latest bandwagon of *reflective practice*, it can be noted that many professions including nursing, medicine, social work, and teaching require workers to examine and understand the way they conduct their practice. It is in this reflecting that they then begin to evaluate their own skills to determine if they require further skill development to be effective employees. By
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evaluating this premise of reflecting, practitioners refine and develop the way in which they see their own professional practice. With this in mind it is important to recognize that experience alone does not appear to be effective for influencing behavior or skill development and the reflecting in or on one’s practice may indeed be the catalyst needed for change. (Loughran, 2002 p.34)

This led to the following question: **What does the current research literature indicate about the potential for the practice of regular reflective writing to increase an early childhood educator’s effectiveness in the workplace?**

“I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say.” Flannery O’Conner

In researching this topic my objectives will be:

- To examine current research related to the practice of daily reflective writing.
- To evaluate the link in the current research between personal reflection and development to teaching pedagogy and career development.

**Reflective Practice** has been defined by many including Bolton (2014), Moon (2001), Rogers (2002) and Schön (1983). Reflective Practice is a systematic rigorous self-directed meaning making process where a person moves from one experience to another through the development of in-sights and practice with the intention of coming to a deeper understanding of one’s personal values and intellectual growth. “Schön (1983) suggests that, in practice, reflection often begins when a routine response produces a surprise or an unexpected outcome. The surprise gets our attention, which may begin a
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process of reflection. Reflective practice is “a dialogue of thinking and doing through which one becomes more skillful.” (Schön, 1983, p. 56)

**Reflexivity** focusses upon one’s actions, thoughts, hopes, fears, values, and assumptions with the aim of gaining insight into them. Reflexivity can enable us to perceive that which we do not in every day practice according to the values we state as being significant to us in our practice. This illuminative self-questioning is a process of uncertainty and self-doubt: the reflexive practitioner has no idea what it will lead them to question. (Bolton, 2014, p.xxii)

**Reflective Writing** involves explorative and expressive use of narrative, metaphor, and so on, and has the power to give different perspective on our relationships, actions and assumptions. Such writings, when reread, reflected upon, and discussed with confidential trusting respectful peers, can develop their full potential to give insight and pathways for development. “Writing is the vehicle for reflection and reflexivity to occur. Writing precedes thinking, not the other way around. (Bolton, 2014, p.117)

**An Early Childhood Educator or Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE)**

“Any individual who is using the title “early childhood educator” (ECE) or “registered early childhood educator” (RECE), as defined by the Ontario *Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007*(revised Dec.2014) as follows:

These individuals are:
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- A person who is employed in a child care centre or by a home child care agency, a person who provides home child care or in-home services or any other person prescribed for the purpose under the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* if, pursuant to that Act and the regulations made under it, the person is not required to,
- hold a certificate of registration, or
- satisfy the requirements for qualifying for a certificate prescribed by the regulations made under this Act.
- Individuals with a diploma in early childhood education or equivalent who is a supervisor and day nursery licensed under the *Day Nurseries Act* (DNA).
- Individuals with a diploma in early childhood education or equivalent who is a supervisor in a day nursery licensed under the DNA.
- Individuals with an ECE diploma or equivalent who is a resource teacher employed by a licensed day nursery or licensed private-home day care agency.

(College of ECE, 2012)

In defining **Early Childhood Educator effectiveness**, the lens in which this is to be measured is in the evidence that the educator can appreciate the purpose of writing to reflect as a mechanism to intentionally create a way of being; This way of being is demonstrated by creating a learning culture for reflection, through valuing a disposition of thinking critically, and respecting multiple perspectives, which in turn elevates their practice from inadvertent or habitual to intentional.
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**Reflective Practice and Interdisciplinary Lens**

The literature review in relation to the topic of reflective practice from an interdisciplinary perspective reveals three main themes: Reflective Practice from a theoretical perspective, examining theories of thinking and reflection, as well as, reflection from a philosophical, spiritual or embodied perspective, and finally from a practice or skill development lens; this includes educational studies and career development.

I set out to discover if there is evidence that supports the purpose of writing to reflect as a mechanism to intentionally create a way of being as an Early Childhood Educator. This way of being includes creating a learning culture of reflection, a disposition of thinking critically, and of valuing multiple perspectives as a context of one’s teaching pedagogy.

The research in the area of reflective practice, reflexivity and reflective writing is substantial and more recently has been a subject predominately focused in the area of educational studies. Much of the most recent research on reflection, reflective practice and reflective writing is in the field of teaching and if we view schools as a microcosm of society then teaching reflects the political, social and economic structure of the global world we live in.

The fundamental theories and models of reflection and reflexivity of Dewey (1933), Mezirow (1981) and Schön (1983) ground the current review. A century ago, John Dewey emphasized the importance of involving the learner in reflection. He believed that our experiences shape us, and when reflective practice is part of the learning, meaning and relevancy is created, which initiates growth and change. (Dewey, 1933) Mezirow’s
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theory (1981) is described as a multi-faceted theory incorporating three types of learning; instrumental, dialogic and self-reflection. Simply put the learner is asking how, when, where and why am I learning? In describing his theory Mezirow (1981) asks the reader to examine the ideal conditions that will allow the learner to make meaning or what he calls “meaning perspective.” (p.4) The learner can do this by challenging their cultural, political, social and psychological assumptions. “Mezirow argued that learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings”. (Mezirow, 1997 p.9). This self-reflection is essential to transformational learning. Becoming critically reflective of the assumptions of others is fundamental to effective collaborative problem posing and solving. Becoming critically reflective of one’s own assumptions is the key to transforming one’s taken-for-granted frame of reference, an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change. (Mezirow, 1997 p.10). Schön (1983) based his work on that of Dewey and is most widely known for his theory of reflecting in and reflecting on one’s practice. His theory was grounded in reflection from a professional knowledge and learning perspective (Bolton, 2014.p.6) In simple terms this is described as reflecting as the experience is occurring or reflecting on the experience after it has occurred. Reflecting in action refers to situations such as: thinking on your feet, acting straight away, and thinking about what to do next. Reflecting on action means you are thinking about what you would do differently next time, taking time to process. (Bolton, 2014.p.6)

As well as the preceding work, the research by Brock (2015) Hunt (2001), Epstein (2003), Bolton (2010) and Ng (2012) delve into the philosophical, spiritual and embodied context of reflection. In order to complete a free write as described by Bolton (2010),
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clearing the mind and creating an environment to write and reflect has been proven useful. Brock (2015) suggests that emotion and intuition also play a significant role in reflective practice. The challenge of course remains in understanding and integrating of the tacit knowledge gained from the experience with the explicit knowledge gained through education and training. (p.35)

Unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations.

Approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner involves fusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity. (Larrivee, 2000, p.293 in Finlay, L, 2008)

Ng (2012) discusses the notion that reflection requires an embodied approach and contends that meditation can be useful in creating the environment to reflect. Insisting that meditation exercises be part of the curriculum reinforces the fact that we are embodied learners, that learning does not only involve the mind. It draws our attention to how the body, emotion, and spirit are involved in the learning process: what we embrace and resist, and why. Moreover, in many Eastern traditions, meditation is used as a discipline that focuses the mind, enhancing our capacity to reflect on our thoughts and actions without judging them. (p.353)

Bolton (2014) rightly points to the notion that we live in an age of multi-tasking, anxiety, and tension. Early Childhood Educators are not immune to these conditions as part of their day to day work. Mindfulness requires a focused state of mind and means making choices in how to respond based on experiences rather than being driven by habitual reactions (p.34) Reflective practice for Early Childhood Educators involves the
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head, the heart and the hands, with the act of writing creating the physical embodiment of the learning process.

Roffey-Barentson and Malthouse (2009) introduce ten useful ‘benefits of reflective practice’ which address the nature of disposition and reflective practice, as well as the personal and professional benefits of reflection. (p.16) These ten benefits highlight the need to integrate our thinking and incorporate our values and beliefs into our day to day practice.

1. Improving teaching practice; if one takes time to reflect on how different part of their work, it is bound to improve teaching
2. Learning from reflective practice; there is good evidence that purposeful reflection helps ‘deep’ learning take place, and this helps make connections between different aspects of your teaching and what goes on around their teaching.
3. Enhancing problem solving skills; by carefully and honestly considering those problems, solutions can be found.
4. Becoming a critical thinker; Critical thinking is about ‘thinking well’ and reflective practice allows one to adjust what they think to take account of changes in circumstances.
5. Making Decisions; as you reflect on your practice, you will find you need to make decisions about what to do (or not to do) next.
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6. Improving your own organizational skills; If one is thinking carefully about what they are doing, identifying possible actions and choices, trying out solutions, and adjusting what to do involves a great deal of organization.

7. Managing personal change; if you are using the techniques of reflective practice, which involves, calm, thoughtful, honest, critical and organized thinking and action, this should introduce a calming and less emotional response to that change.

8. Acknowledging personal values; there will be things which take place within a professional situation as a teacher which will bump up one’s own personal values such as what you believe in, and what you think is wrong or right. How these are affected by teaching will vary.

9. Taking your own advice; teachers are often more critical of their own teaching than anyone else.

10. Recognizing emancipatory benefits; if as an educator one reflects on the nine benefits of reflective practice which have so far been described; this is a model of practice which represents the teacher as someone with influence over their own teaching. This is what is at the heart of reflective practice. (p.16)

Bolton (2014) elaborates on the political and social responsibility reflective practice involves. Bolton states there is much in life we cannot control, including our emotions; but we can control our actions. Questioning and challenging our assumptions is part of the process. Having said this, Bolton suggests in part reflective practice for genuine development involves taking responsibility for our actions, contesting imbalances in power and asking questions. (p.10)
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For Early Childhood Educator these expectations and benefits of reflection align with the obligations set out by the professions self-regulating body. The College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) has established a *Code of Ethics and Standard of Practice*; one such example of a practice is Standard IV: Professional Knowledge and Competence:

Professionalism as an Individual: Early Childhood Educators strive for excellence in their professional practice and critical thinking. Early Childhood Educators access current evidence-based research and are able to transfer this knowledge into practice. They are aware of the need to enhance their own learning in order to support both children and families. Early Childhood Educators demonstrate their commitment to ongoing professional development by engaging in continued learning. (CECE, 2011, p. 21)

It is through reflection and reflective writing Early Childhood Educators can consider their skills and develop a plan for continued professional learning. This is often done with a critical friend or peer.

As with any learning experience there is the cultural and social context of the experience. Boud (2009), Mezirow (1999) and Schön (1981) describe reflection as a cognitive skill or process and the relevant research related education theory sees that what we reflect on and any action we may take is also positioned in a social context. This leads to the notion of a collaborative process of reflecting and in the literature this is referred to as a community of practice. (Wesley & Buysse, 2001) It is in this dialogue
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stage that assumption and perspectives can be challenged. This approach to reflection is particularly useful in light of the interdisciplinary nature of the role of the RECE. The concept of communities of practice as described by Wesley & Buysse (2001), explores the benefit of reflecting on one’s practice in the context of a collaborative practice, or a learning community. As Early Childhood Educators grow in their field more and more expectations exist to work collaboratively with other professionals and families.

“Communities of practices and appreciating diverse roles are quite common in early childhood education as they recognize many concerns about children and families do not fall neatly into specific disciplines or functions.” (Wesley & Buysse, 2001 p. 118)

Wesley & Buysse, (2001) go on to recommend three elements that are necessary for success, with the first element of making reflection a shared value among professionals. This supports the elements of reflective practice and the need to explore an interdisciplinary lens while examining reflective thinking and being.

Boud (2001) reinforces the benefit of reflection in a social context for Early Childhood Educators:

These reflective processes can be undertaken in isolation from others, but doing so often leads to a reinforcement of existing views and perceptions. Working in pairs or with a group for which learning is reason for being can begin to transform perspectives and challenge old patterns of learning. It is only through a give and take with others and by confronting the challenges they pose that critical reflection can be promoted (p.14-15)
"Awareness of one’s own intuitive thinking usually grows out of practice in articulating it to others." (Schon)

The Effects of Writing on Reflection

So how does reflective writing play a role in reflective practice? If we return to the Ministry of Education (2007) definition and the elements of practice identified as systematic, reflective, and collaborative approach; there is a clear connection to creating a systemic practice of reflection and writing, thus creating the structure necessary to fully appreciate the reflective process.

In examining the work of Boud (2001), Moon (2001), Trichter Metcalf, and Simon, (2002), McGuire, Lay, & Peters (2009) and Bolton (2014) the thinking and theories behind writing for reflection are explored. Since the term reflection is widely used in many contexts, the writing process may provide the educator a means for creating clarity for the purpose of their reflection and in particular the subject they are writing about. This supports the idea of creating a systematic approach to reflection. Moon (2001) describes reflective writing as “cognitive housekeeping” (p. 6). The capacity to put thoughts on paper is not necessarily a straight forward process. Moon (2001) identifies factors that may influence writing and they include the reason for writing (personal or academic), whether others will be reading the post, and the writer’s emotional state at the time of writing.

Reflective writing distances (puts out there, onto paper) but also creates closer contact with emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Writing involving explorative and expressive use of narrative, metaphor, and so on, has the creative power to give different perspectives on our relationships, actions and assumptions. Such writings,
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when reread, reflected upon, and discussed with confidential trusting respectful peers, can develop their full potential to give insight and pathways for development. (Bolton, G, 2014, p.117-118)

These elements of writing align with the argument that in order to be a reflective educator one must examine and understand the emotional aspect of reflection and make meaning and context in their work. Trichter Metcalf and Simon (2002) in their book, Writing the Mind Alive: The Proprioceptive Method for Finding your Authentic Voice set out to explore writing as a means of documenting one’s feeling and thinking. They contend that merely thinking or expressing one’s thoughts is not enough. They suggest by slowing down enough to write one’s thoughts, you are essentially holding the thoughts still, which allows for reflection to occur. (p.18)  Trichter Metcalf and Simon (2002) who have been teaching writing for reflection for decades also argue that the effect on writing on their students has a dramatic impact in a number of ways; they include: “increased motivation for learning, the ability to express more complex thoughts and in turn the participants became more relaxed and generous with their response to one another.” (Trichter Metcalf and Simon, 2002, p.19) This idea of writing allows for inner listening and is an avenue for the writer to honour his or her own voice in the writing process. In the case of Early Childhood Educators writing can facilitate the process of questioning and expressing with more confidence which can translate in the educators being able to address with conviction why they are doing what they do in the classroom. Writing also promotes objectivity, a way of distancing oneself from the initial experience and of distinguishing between the actual experience and its interpretation. (Zuckermann, & Rajuan, 2008, p.2). Skattebol (2010) states “affect theories dispute separations between
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mind and body; and between the individual, their communities and political contexts. Affect is a tangible, embodied force that operates between people and as such it adds complexity to the way we think about relationships in learning. (p.78)

Editor Avril Brock (2015) in her book *The Early Years Reflective Practice Handbook*, argues that many key researchers including Bolton (2010) and Moon (2010) have suggested that sometimes interpretations and reflections can lack clarity, and be superficial and that educators need to be taught a systematic approach to reflect, that allows them to move through the everyday and immediate situation (p.8)

The intent of the reflective experience of writing on the part of the educator equals the notion of reflective competence. Hence, the greater the awareness or intentionality of the reflective experience, leads to a greater potential for a change or transformation in one’s practice. Writing can act as the physical embodied experience that assists educators to begin and then deepen their own reflective process.

If we return to understanding that there is learning theory behind this practice of thinking, and learning, we can then see the foundation for reflective writing created. For educators the driving force is to appreciate the intentionality of their reflective practice verse the accidental nature of their experience and practice. This awareness can bring enlightenment to the notion of writing for reflection.

While considering the process of reflective practice and that of a learning journey, the learning theory of Mezirow (1999) has been revisited by many and the relevance of his thinking that a disorienting event needs to occur before transformation can occur appears to be expanded and explained by the theory of unconscious incompetence/competence and the stages of awareness. Nohl (2015) suggests, “with its departure from
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disorientation-driven transformative learning, my practice based model bears resemblance to Clark’s (1993) empirical finding that, for an “indefinite period,” the actors “consciously or unconsciously” search “for something which is missing in their life” and that, as soon as they “find this ‘missing piece,’ the transformative learning process is catalyzed.” (Nohl, 2015, p.47) The following graphic speaks to the cyclical process or practice that reflection encourages. As Taylor (2007) explains “we revisit conscious incompetence, making discoveries in the holes in our knowledge and skills, becoming discouraged, which fuels incentive to proceed. We perpetually learn, inviting ongoing tutelage (guidance, instruction), mentoring and self-study (ongoing conscious competence).”

Figure 1- Conscious Competence Learning Model courtesy of Will Taylor, 2007.

As Early Childhood Educators are embarking on the practice of reflection the elements that Taylor (2007) describes supports the process of reflection and creates concreteness to what for some might feel quite abstract. The notion of writing, reflecting individually, with a critical friend or mentor is noted as the educator moves through the
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stage of conscious competence. Rather than becoming complacent or habitual, Taylor (2007) suggests moving into reflective consciousness which he describes as mature practice. Skattebol (2010), suggest “engagement in this type of reflection propels teachers to examine the dimensions of the teaching or learning that popular discourse regards as interior, and how non-conscious (often collective) habits operate in tandem with our conscious and cognitively driven interactions.” (p.89) This movement from unconscious and sometimes instinctive practice to intentional practice is paramount to the skill of reflective writing.

In the end Early Childhood Educators are being asked to document and write more frequently in their work environment, and some of these expectations are coming from outside their usual scope of practice, with the introduction of Professional Learning requirements. Many have researched the tools that support writing and reflection in the field of education: journaling, portfolios and blogging. These include Boud, D. (2001), Chretien, K., Goldman, E., & Faselis, C. (2008), and Loughran, J. J. (2002). It is then no surprise then that The College of ECE (CECE) has enacted policy that will require RECE’s to keep a learning log and professional portfolio. In light of the benefits outlined for writing to reflect, these new expectations highlight the purpose of engaging in intentional reflective writing for Early Childhood Educators. This in essence provides for the motivation and urgency for educators to begin to write for reflection. It would be incumbent on the profession to provide training, opportunities and practice where educators can learn the technical skills required to write for reflection, while becoming more comfortable with the technique of reflective practice.
Conclusion

In summary, this research paper examines reflective practice through the lens of Early Childhood Educators while investigating the elements of writing from a psychological, social, spiritual and educational lens. The goal was to determine if there is adequate evidence that writing can in fact influence the ability of educators to elevate their reflective skills in their daily work with children, families and colleagues. As the profession of early childhood education itself is experiencing a transformation, educators too are looking to redefine or transform their practice. The expectation is that educators will utilize a reflective stance as a pedagogical practice which in turn will influence their work leading their practice towards a more inquiry-based program model. The demands and motivation to become reflective practitioners is real, but the practice of reflection must be integrated into the educators’ day-to-day being if success is to occur. (Brock, 2015, p.9) This may prove to be a challenge for some educators and may act as a renewed motivation for others to reflect. The practice of reflective writing as found in the research does have the potential to act as a bridge for educators’ self-reflection, professional learning and in turn will allow for self-examination of their own goals and personal and professional challenges they may be experiencing.

As Early Childhood Educator begin their journey through the reflective process, writing can act as a catalyst to embrace new skills and pedagogical practices with the support of a critical friend or mentor and the shared understanding among their
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colleagues to create a culture of reflective writing and thinking which can ultimately improve practice.

It appears from the long history of reflection, (Dewey 1910, and Schön, 1983) and the evidence that writing for reflection is useful for Early Childhood Educators there is reasonable expectations to continue to investigate the practice from a psychological, social, spiritual and educational lens. Reflective practice requires awareness and deep understanding of one’s strengths and vulnerabilities, while exploring ways to access the resources necessary to function to the fullest potential in the workplace. This inner growth depends on feedback from our experiences and learning. This is a stance that many can embrace, while others need to take the journey with the support of a trusted peer or colleague.

Reflective writing requires Registered Early Childhood Educators to examine and hold their thinking in place; it is in this pause and reflection that allows dialogue to occur on their practice. In doing so a level of trust, self-respect, responsibility, generosity, genuineness, positive regard and empathy is needed. (Bolton, 2014, p.23) These are lofty characteristics of a quality educators’ practice but ones that highlight the need for further exploration and research of the practice of writing for reflection and the potential it holds to elevate one’s practice from inadvertent or habitual to intentional. As Bolton (2014) suggests “writing can enable us to go through the mirror, rather than merely reflecting on back-to-front mirror images of the self.” (p.116)

“When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves.” Viktor E. Frankl
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Figures

Figure 1: Taylor, W (2007), Chair, Department of Homeopathic Medicine, National College of Natural Medicine, Portland, Oregon, USA. Retrieved from http://www.businessballs.com/consciouscompetencelearningmodel.htm, on March 27, 2015.
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