

Managing Yourself and Your Learning

Sally Jaeckle

Jamie has been working as an early years practitioner for over ten years and is about to take up a place on the sector endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Childhood Studies. While still at school, Jamie was interested in working with young children and his careers teacher helped him to find a work placement in a local nursery. He swiftly built a strong rapport both with the children and the nursery staff and started volunteering on a weekly basis. On leaving school, the Manager of the setting offered him a part-time job. This grew to fulltime and over the years he has gained NVQ qualifications at Level 2 and Level 3. Just over a year ago, with some encouragement, Jamie successfully applied for a post at a new Children's Centre. Although he was ready for this new challenge, he found the change far more daunting than he had expected – he missed his old setting and the security of its well-rehearsed schedules and routines.

For several years Jamie had followed the same routine with the children almost every day and took great pride in being well organised, planning a set number of activities each week that the children always enjoyed. He had always had good relationships with the children's parents, and knew that they expected the children to come home clean and tidy with at least one artistic creation every day. He had been happy, safe in the knowledge that he was doing a good job!

Life at the Children's Centre was very different and he suddenly found that his world had been turned upside down. Now, the routines tended to flow with the rhythms of the children, and the children themselves were far more independent than they had been at his previous setting. They were encouraged to think for themselves, decide what they wanted to do and to choose how they were going to do it, and there was certainly no expectation of 'end products' to be taken home at the end of the day. Jamie felt very uncomfortable with this way of working – it was far more flexible than he was used to and he felt that things were spiralling out of control. He was concerned that mistakes were going to happen, possibly dangerous ones, because life in the setting appeared so unpredictable and, he assumed, disorganised. In fact the opposite was true.

Worse, each week after work, the team would come together to reflect on how well the week had gone ... discussing the aspects that had gone well and the elements that they felt they needed to change. They talked about their observations of the children and the experiences that had interested the children the most, and they thought about how they could use this information to plan for the week to come. Jamie dreaded these sessions – he had never had an opportunity to talk about his practice in this way before – and although he thought he was a good practitioner, this was a new and

different way of working. He worried that he had nothing to contribute and was frustrated because he did not know how to put his thinking into words.

For several weeks, he simply listened to the conversations around him and though he said little, he thought deeply, possibly for the first time, about his role as a practitioner and the quality of the experiences on offer to the children in the setting. Gradually he began to see the provision through the children's eyes, and he could sense that the children were happier, more confident, interested and eager to learn than the children had been in his previous setting. With this realisation, Jamie felt a sparkle that had never really been there before and he too became happier, more confident, interested and eager to learn. He now sees himself, his role and his relationship with the children and his colleagues in a very different light. He is an animated contributor to the weekly review sessions and, with his colleagues, is committed to an ongoing cycle of reflection, discussion and development to make every child's experience at the setting the best it can be.

It is his new found sparkle and eagerness to learn that has prompted him to enroll on the Foundation Degree – something he never in a million years thought that he could ever do!

By making time to reflect on my practice I have gained the confidence to question my own views, attitudes and values and to understand my role in a different and deeper way. I now know that if I am going to give the children the opportunities they deserve I need to regularly reflect on the quality of their experiences at the Centre so that I can try to make them the best that they can be

Reflective questions

- To what extent do you consider yourself a reflective practitioner?
- Children develop and learn in many different ways and so do you. What would help you to reflect on your own learning journey and how would you share and celebrate this with your colleagues?
- What opportunities are there in your setting to get together as a whole team to reflect on the quality of the provision you offer?
- Do you have opportunities to work with colleagues in the wider early years community to share your practice, identify your strengths and work collaboratively to support developments?