

Details of Innovation Project

Project Description

This project will describe the approach and attitude of the staff, children and families of Stepping Stones Early Learning Centre on our journey of self-reflection. It will highlight the challenges and opportunities this journey offered and the direction that it is leading us in the future.

Describe Your Innovative approach.

Inspired by a deep seated passion and belief in both Aistear and Síolta, reflective practise consciously and purposefully entered the daily routine of Stepping Stones Early Learning Centre in 2013.

Our vision for our reflective practise was something that was going to be a continuous process that involved staff analysing and interpreting our work in order to identify what drives our children's learning and development. We also envisioned it as a method of accessing and reconnecting with our own values and understanding of children's learning and development.

Aistear and Síolta tell us that reflective practice is a key feature of high quality early childhood education and care settings. Reflective practice allows us as early childhood professionals to develop a critical understanding of our own practice, and continually develop the necessary skills, knowledge and approaches to achieve the best outcomes for children. In Stepping Stones, we are passionate about high quality early education and so the idea of reflective practise taking us to the next level of excellence was something that both inspired and motivated us.

Research tells us that professionals who regularly reflect on what they do, why they do it and how this new knowledge can be used to improve their practice, achieve the best outcomes for children and families. Working closely with families is something that is at the core of our ethos and so we were keen to engage with something that will help us to develop and promote this key aim of our service.

While reflective practise was occurring on an ad hoc and informal basis in Stepping Stones, we felt we wanted it to be more streamlined and focused. We understood that for reflective practise to flourish and be valued, we needed to create this environment. We needed to upskill in this area and set reflection time aside each day for both staff and children.

Self-reflection is not something that comes naturally to people and so we held an in-service training session on self-reflective practise and what it meant to us. We nominated a mentor (the manager) to provide resources, skills and guidance to develop reflective practice.

In Stepping Stones we see reflection as a process that requires us to take daily experiences, internalise them, turn them over in our mind and filter these new thoughts through previous lived experiences and personal values and biases, before deciding how best to proceed. Our reflections are both personal and involve other team members. Our reflections often lead to debate and

discussion over why and how we do things and have led to many changes being deliberated and implemented.

One prominent feature of our reflective practise involves our reflection diary. Dedicated staff reflection time is allocated during our non-contact time of each day. Staff members utilise this time to reflect on what the children did, said and made, and we find that reflection on these experiences helps us to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for children. This in turn helps us to improve our practise. It influences where we take the children's learning and focus on what we have learned from the children in a given day.

In Stepping Stones we believe that we learn as much from the children as we teach them. In order to recognise and appreciate this, we need to be very much in tune with the children, their wants and needs and strengths and weaknesses. As professionals, we aim to create real opportunities for children to express their own thoughts and feelings and actively influence what happens in their lives.

In September of 2014 we had a slightly varied daily routine to that of 2013. This year due to an increase in numbers we thought it best to divide the children into two groups for the first hour of the day. Jack was with us both of the last two years and he wasn't keen on our new routine. He told us he wanted to be able to play in either room whenever he wanted and wanted to play with everyone all the time. He told us that he didn't like the new way we do things and wanted to go back to the old way.

The staff noted this and spoke to him about it. We explained to him why things changed and why we thought it best to keep things as they were. Jack appeared happy enough until a day later when he came back to us and explained why he thought it better to revert back to the old routine, why it worked better than the new routine and how we could incorporate some of our 2014 changes in but not all. He explained that sometimes the children wanted to paint and if they were in the front room they couldn't until the groups changed. He pointed out that he and Ally were friends and they couldn't play together until after snack time. He didn't think this was either fair or fun!

This really showed us reflection from the child's point of view and the influence it can have. We joined Jack in his reflection and compromised on our new daily routine. Our compromise was to move him to Ally's group so he could play with her. We observed Jack for the next few days and he appeared happy. We asked his Mam to have a chat with us about how he was settling back. We shared both staff and Jacks' reflections with her and asked for her input. She acknowledged that Jack was struggling and had mentioned at home that he didn't like the new routine. She told us that Jack told her that play school was for playing! Her home based reflection with her son and her sharing it with us, made the staff of Stepping Stones revisit our routine and question why we introduced it. We decided to ask the children during group time how they felt about the group being separated for the first hour each morning and the general consensus was they wanted the groups together and both rooms accessible at all times. This reflection with staff, parents and children resulted in us altering our daily routine to meet the needs of the children.

We make a conscious effort to be aware of the individual learning styles of each child and facilitate learning experiences for the children that focus on this style. Each child in our service has a key

worker. This key worker will ensure that they have a meaningful learning story carried out each month. This learning story is recorded in their *Individual Learning Journal* with written, digital and artistic evidence and is in turn shared with the children's parents. Once recorded each key worker will reflect on what this learning story tells them about the child and how this will influence their planning. Children have the opportunity to read their learning journals and look at the wide variety of photos showing the learning and play opportunities experienced in Stepping Stones. *One day one of the children asked me to read them a story. Naturally I was happy to oblige. As we made our way to the book corner Ally suggested that we read stories from their own books. She was referring to the learning journals. I got learning journals for each of the children present and read stories that the staff had written. You could see the children noticeably swelling with pride as their story was read. It was lovely to hear the children's reflections on past learning. As I reflected on this at the end of day I noted how much the children had enjoyed it and questioned how I could take this to the next level. I thought perhaps I could read the children's own stories at group time as opposed to a traditional story book. I did this the next day. Alex told me 'we're really good at making good stories!' I was delighted to hear this and it inspired me to continue this activity on a weekly basis with the children.*

One of our children, Amelie, was reading her learning journal and came upon a picture of her engaging in a colour recognition activity. *'Look, there I am only learning my colours and now I know them all'*. She visibly stood taller and was clearly thrilled to recognise her own learning and development.

Our learning journal has evolved from a basic scrap book to a purpose designed and professionally printed learning journal. This was inspired by reflection with parents at the end of the last academic year. Parents were, in general, thrilled with the stories we had recorded and the effort required from both staff and children. One parent did mention to me that

Photographs and to a smaller extent, videos play a significant part in our reflection with the children. Each day we take many photos of the children's learning and play. Each week these photos are compiled into a weekly photo show highlighting the children's choices, activities and play mates. This show is broadcast on a projector and as a group the children discuss what they did that week, what meaning it had and how they felt about it. While we haven't labelled this time as 'reflection' with the children it forms very much part of their weekly routine and an aspect that they respond really well to. It has shown us that children can learn to make decisions and justify decisions made, regulate their own behaviour, meet complex challenges, and take responsibility for their actions.

'I love Fridays when we get to see all the photos of everything we did and played with' – Alex

Parents are invited in regularly to be a part of this reflection through parent teacher meetings. We take this opportunity to reinforce that their children are learning all of the time, as opposed to engaged in meaningless play. Parents love to see the daily goings on of the preschool and regularly have expressed surprise and astonishment as what the children can do and achieve for themselves, as well as the skills and competencies they are becoming proficient in. As one parent

noted *'you do so much in three short hours, the children love it and they don't even realise all the skills and knowledge they are soaking up'*. These such reflections from parents have inspired us to introduce 'Stay & Play' sessions. These play and stay sessions have been announced in our February Newsletter and we have had a great reaction from parents. Clare has said she will be in as soon as we can accommodate her to read some stories and meet Amelie's friends properly. Julianne, who is a primary school teacher called to see if we could accommodate her during her mid term as she won't get a chance later. She noted what a great initiative this was for the children and how it would make pre school more meaningful to parents and give the "how was your day?" more focus and meaning for both parents and teachers. We intend to use this time to reflect with parents on what they have seen and answer any questions they might have on the significance of what they have seen. We hope to encourage parents to reflect on what they have seen with their children when they get home.

We record some of our learning stories in power point so that we can share them with the children and parents over the projector also. Late last summer we revisited a learning story that was recorded when the children were very new to Stepping Stones. The story was carried on over a number of weeks with a lot of high level involvement and interaction from the children. At the end of the story Josh exclaimed *'wow, we really loved that play!'*

Reflective practice allows us, as early childhood professionals to develop a critical understanding of own practice, and continually improve the necessary skills, knowledge and approaches to achieve the best outcomes for children.

Describe the overall benefits of your innovation

Since its inauguration, our self-reflective practises are now an integral part of our daily routine. This time allows us to assess what we have done and how effective we were. Our reflections have led to:

- Planning and reviewing to include different perspectives—those of staff, children and families
- Everyone involved speaks honestly about current practice and is open to new possibilities and making changes. This is something that management has commented on time and time again as one of the major strengths of Stepping Stones.
- There is a professional climate of respect for everyone's ideas
- We 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
- We plan practical strategies or actions to improve the quality areas that need improvement; why is this important? What more could you do?

The development of the practise of self-reflection has meant something different to each of the team members. When asked to reflect on where the journey of self-reflection has taken them they had the following thoughts:

Reflective practice has helped me to make a connection between what I have learned and my understanding of quality and being able to apply this in practice. It has allowed me to develop a greater understanding of the children in our care, to respond more appropriately to their needs. Most importantly for me it has made me very aware of the impact my pedagogical approach has on the children and be constructively critical of my own strengths and weaknesses, where I am doing well and where improvements and adjustments can be made to make sure the children are benefitting from positive and responsive learning environment - Kathleen.

I feel that reflective practice has positively impacted on our work in Stepping Stones in that we have good relationships between the children, their family and staff. This therefore enables the children to feel comfortable and relaxed as the care meets their needs. Our reflections have required good teamwork to effectively implement change and has this helped create a pleasant atmosphere not only for children and families but also for staff to work in. Our curriculum reflections help us to ensure all children's needs and abilities are considered when planning. We ensure we enhance their development by setting different challenges for the children. We observe the children on an ongoing basis and this helps staff and parents see how their child is developing and the door is always open for parents to discuss any issues or queries they may have. We also hold meetings with staff on regular basis to keep up to date with all staff on curriculums and any new ideas that staff may have. Overall, our reflections have ensured that we provide a very high quality service that provides an environment that encourages and supports learning through play for all children - Claire

My reflective practise has made me question my strengths and weaknesses as an early years professional, an early year's leader and an early year's advocate. It has made me constantly aware of my daily interactions with children and the effect that these interactions can have on their development. It is encouraged me to think of my leadership

practise, my guidance for staff and my overall management approach. Regular self-reflection has made me query my effectiveness as an early years advocate with parents. It has made me more aware and cognisant of how I explain the children's daily interactions and learning. It has made me aware of best practise and ensures, at all times, that I strive to implement it and encourage and inspire others to do the same. – Lorraine

The staff are marvellous with young children and are skilled in creating a welcoming, stimulating and safe environment. As a teacher I understand the organising, reflection and planning that it takes to offer a service such as this – Susan (Parent)

A truly wonderful fun filled environment where the staff work tirelessly to ensure the children are introduced to as many experiences as possible I cannot speak highly enough of this little piece of magic in the midlands. – Leah (Parent)

In my role as an early childhood educator, I feel that daily reflection enable and facilitates the documentation of our experiences and day to day goings on of pre-school life. It allows me to evaluate the happenings of the day in both a professional and personal manner. It allows me to think critically about 'what', 'why' and 'where to next', thus allowing further planning to happen more easily, also allowing that future planning to be relevant to what is happening now as well as in the future. – Michelle

Reflection enables me to become aware of my weaknesses and strengths, note the learning that takes place throughout the day and how this learning occurs. This in turn aids my planning for future learning. – Louise

How and when the innovation was implemented

This innovative practise began in September 2013 as a result of deep and committed involvement with Sólta and Aistear, in particular. Our reflective practise has evolved, developed and improved and has a constantly changing face. We embrace this cycle of development and see it as progress and continued evidence of an emerging workforce and curriculum in Stepping Stones.

As a staff we are committed to ongoing, self-reflective practise and are eager and excited about the twists, turns and bumps that we will encounter on this never ending journey.

The ability to be a role model and influence others

Throughout this ongoing venture, we as a staff have all, at times, struggled individually with reflection. To address this we have all been a source of support and encouragement in the daily reflection journey.

As manager and the initiator of this project, I took responsibility to keep motivation levels high and the reasons and benefits of ongoing professional practise at the forefront of everyone's mind. Some of my methods included in-service training on reflective practise, discussions regarding the benefits and importance at team meetings, motivational quotes and reasons for reflecting posted around the office and the classrooms. One of my more effective methods was support and positive reinforcement as to the quality and the use of the reflections that were shared with other staff.

Our reflections have changed and developed over the last two years. This has always been in consultation with staff and changes and alterations were discussed and implemented as a team. This reflective practise has undoubtedly led to better learning experiences for children, a better work place for staff and a greater sense of working as a team for both staff and parents.

It is a process that has become as integral and important to our day as saying hello or goodbye. It is a process that is ever changing and altering our practise and one that we embrace as we continue to provide high quality, enriching early year's experiences for children in our preschool.

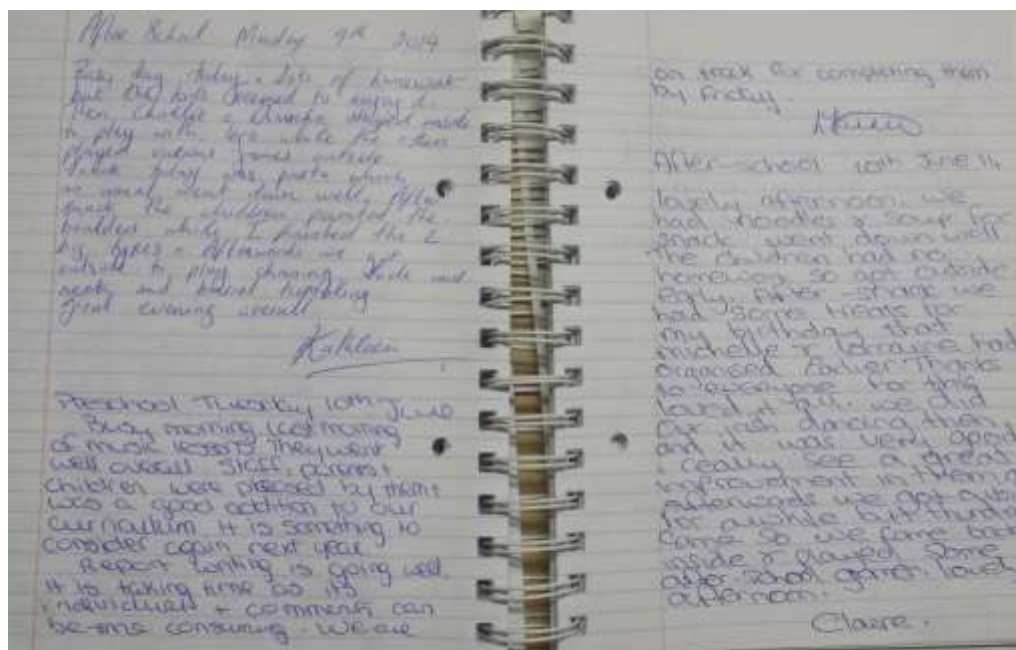
Plans for the future

Going forward we have some further innovations planned such as our stay and play sessions. This is one of the ways in which we hope to involve parents more in our reflective practise. We are also planning on introducing a space for parent's thoughts and reflections on our learning stories and encourage parents to add to these on a regular basis.

We are activists in our community and hope to in the future include the community in our innovative reflective practise. There are a few ideas bubbling here in Stepping Stones with regards this but watch out in 2016 for a celebration of children in the community innovation project!



Our first formal reflection diary – September 2013

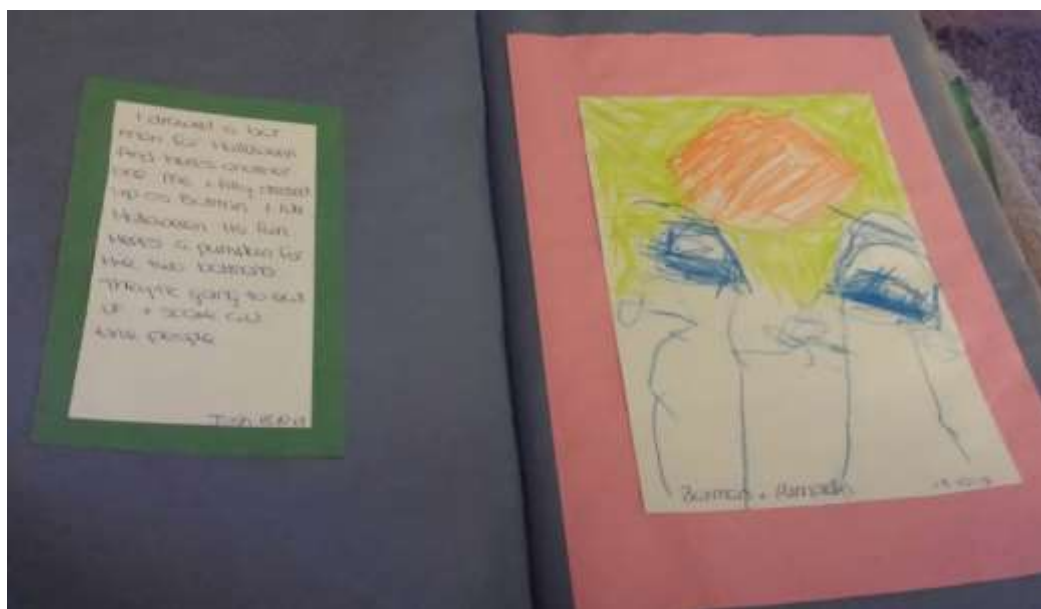


A snippet of our initial reflections

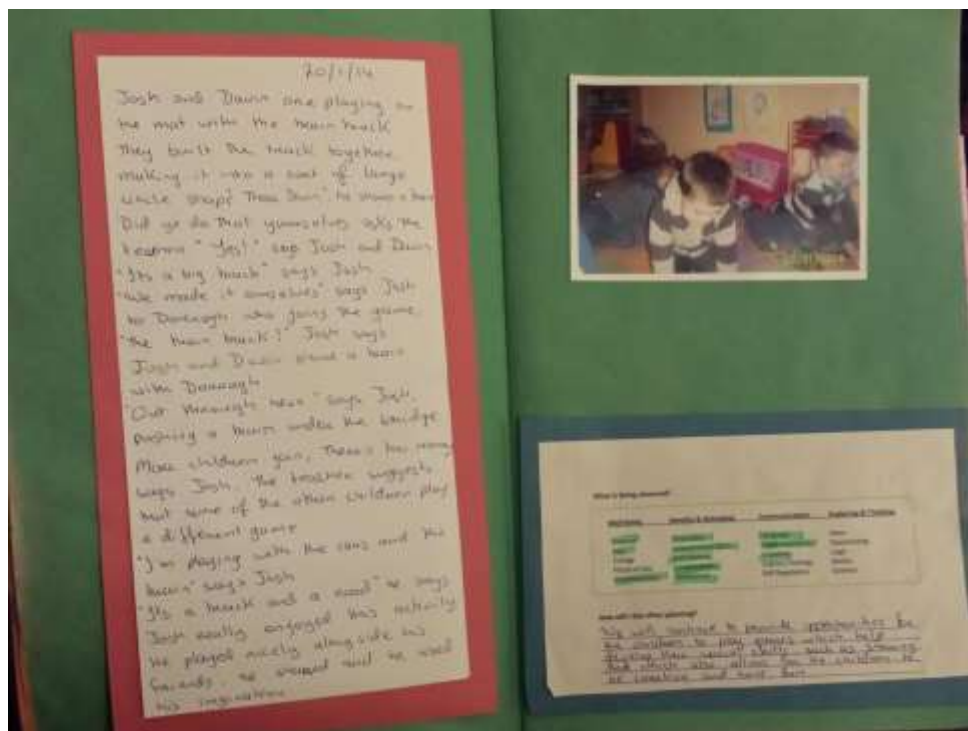


We recorded our learning in photo form to share and reflect on with the children

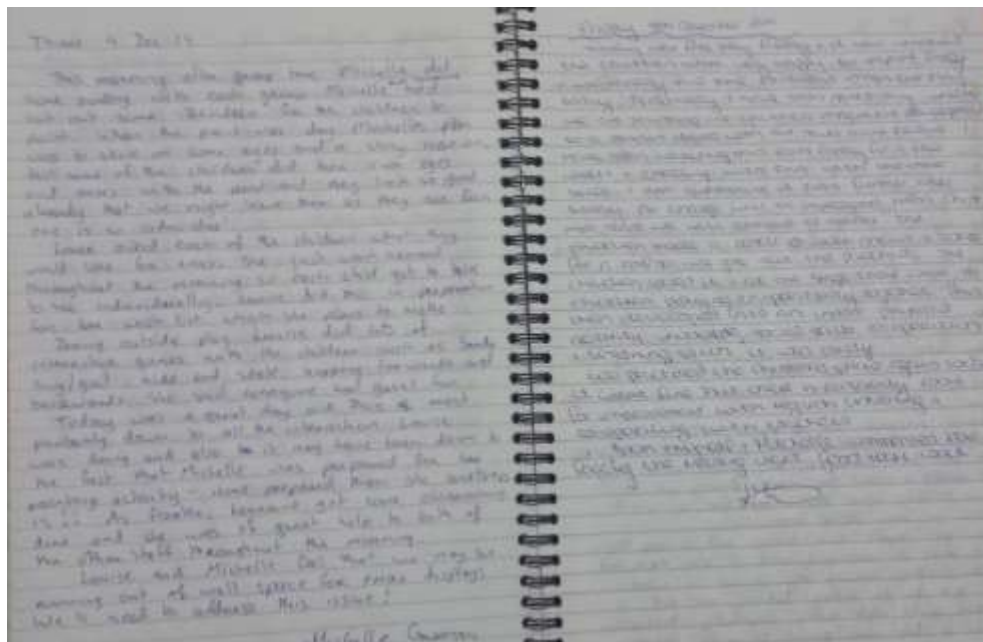
In 2013 our Learning Journals evolved to this



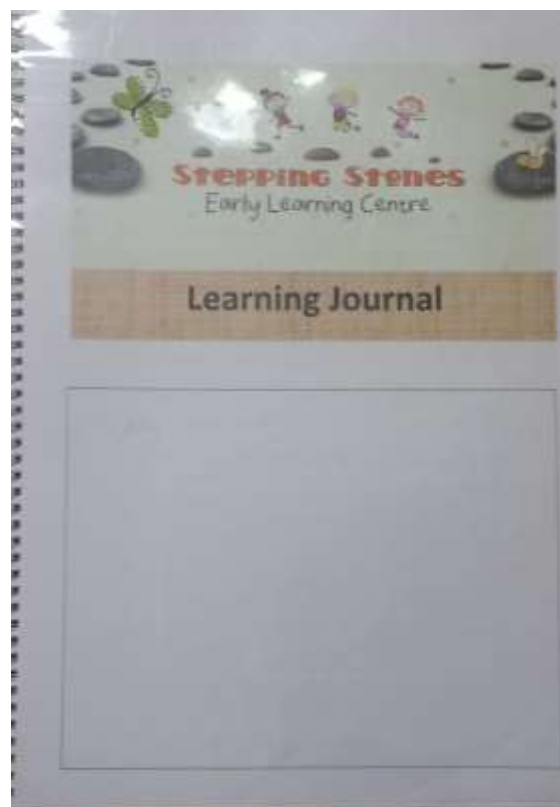
A glimpse inside



Our Reflection Book evolves for the 20114 – 2015 year



Our reflecting as well as our diary evolves



After the success of our first Learning Journal – we outsource the printing of them.

A glimpse inside.....





We hope you have enjoyed our reflection journey!