



Understanding and Leading *Capable, Confident, and Curious:* Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework

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A user guide for directors, pre-primary leads, and other pedagogical leaders, as they support staff in engaging with the framework in their everyday practices.

MODULE 5: OBSERVATION AND DECISION-MAKING AND
MODULE 6: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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Introduction

As you read through the early learning curriculum framework, you may notice that there is a great deal of emphasis on observation and reflection. These two practices should be part of your daily routine and provide the foundation for the decisions you make in your early learning setting(s).

Module 5 will introduce you to observation and decision-making and how they work together to provide a deeper, richer experience for children. You may want to pay attention to how you are observing children, and for what purpose? Knowing what to look for, and what the possibilities are for responding to what you see and hear, is a crucial part of inquiry-based early learning curriculum, play-based practice, and responsive and meaningful teaching and learning.

Module 6 will introduce you to the practice of reflection and how it must be a part of any decision-making process, as well as a daily habit. An important part of responsive teaching is to think deeply, to reflect, before you decide what to do next. While it's exciting to respond quickly to an interesting action on the part of a child, reflection—especially with others—can lead us to a better understanding of what children are doing, and why. It can also provide alternate lenses, or ways of noticing, through which we can see what children are doing.

Considering all the possibilities for action leads to high-quality, intentional programming:

“Careful observation and documentation allows educators to reflect on the learning environment and its activities, and modify, expand, or create new plans for it and children’s experiences.”

(Educator’s Guide to Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia’s Early Learning Curriculum Framework 2018, 40)

This guide is a pathway to help you engage and support staff as they use and implement the early learning curriculum framework and its accompanying educator’s guide. This reference guide for modules 5 and 6 is a resource rather than a recipe or checklist. It allows for flexibility in how the framework is implemented and applied.

Possibilities for Use

In early learning settings, observation is a part of daily life and is a useful habit in the classroom. Depending on where you or your organization are on this journey, here are some of the ways you can use this guide:

- Discuss at staff meetings. Think about existing connections between your practices and the early learning curriculum framework.
- Enhance training sessions by using it when you see that there are gaps in educators’ background knowledge and practices, or if you feel there is a need for further information, discussion, or clarification.
- Revisit the key concepts of observation and reflection. What are people’s understandings and misunderstandings?

Package Contents and Structure

Each module has either hard copies or links to useful articles, videos, and blogs. There is also background information about key topics, talking points, and connections to the early learning curriculum framework. Choose whatever resources you feel are most suited to your educators. Both of these modules also include

- **Reflection questions**

To help explore each topic. If these are given out in advance of the meeting, educators will have an opportunity to reflect on their own practices and be better prepared to engage in discussions.

- **Background notes**

To support pedagogical leadership. Your group will have different levels of experience and training. The reflection questions and exercises will support you in supporting them on their learning journey.

- **Suggested group exercises**

To make the framework authentic, accessible, and useable. Staff may choose to bring their own materials and ideas to the discussion, such as photos, notes, and documentation.

- **Instructions for 'deciding on an action'**

To provide a variety of ways to move forward. Everyone's opinion should be heard and taken into consideration.

- **PowerPoint presentation**

To use when presenting the modules; you can use any or all of the slides.

Before Beginning

- Think about observation, note-taking, photography, and reflection, and consider ways for staff to share what they already know and do.
- Consider how your reflections and decisions affect or include diverse populations, cultures, and community. Take stock of how this happens in your centre.
- List some of the challenges and concerns that can arise about these topics. What are some of the common misunderstandings? You cannot prepare for every question or concern, but you can consider common ones (e.g., finding time to observe and reflect) so that they can be discussed openly.
- Share the reading materials and links with the group in advance, to provide a foundation for discussion. This leads to more insightful discussions and helps staff raise questions.
- Reach an agreement with your staff about how your meeting or learning times might be used. What works best for them? How will you get the most out of your time?
- Balance talk and action. Find ways to make the early learning curriculum framework come to life in realistic and practical ways.

Preparing for Meetings

- Ensure you're comfortable with the concepts described in this document. If there is an aspect for which you need support, talk with others who are more experienced, and read, reach out, and ask questions!
- Provide a brief icebreaker to loosen up your staff's thinking and help them leave their workday behind.
- Decide on a method of delivery and take into account the group's dynamics and knowledge levels. Acknowledge that newly hired staff may have significant experiences to share. Is your group well acquainted with observation and reflection or will the concepts be new to them? These considerations will affect how you proceed.
- Offer a way for participants to evaluate the training. Their feedback will guide your next steps. You may find that staff need more clarification or experience with a particular concept before moving on. There is no rush. If you wish to provide focused workshops on a particular topic may be needed; your site coordinator or consultant can help set up further learning opportunities.

Staff should

- read the provided information beforehand.
- come with questions, ideas, and details of prior experiences, and be prepared to share.
- bring an open mind and their curiosity!

Module 5: Observation and Decision-Making

Introduction

Educators observe children at play every day. This module will use a variety of media such as video clips and photographs to introduce you to processes for using observation as a decision-making tool, including how to make meaning of what you've seen, dig deeply to understand, and appreciate the importance of taking time for dialogue before responding.

This module addresses the following questions, based on the practices described in the early learning curriculum framework:

- Why are daily observations important in terms of program planning?
- How can observations enable me to extend children's play and introduce new concepts?
- How will I know what to observe and what is useful?
- What kinds of actions might I take in response to children?
- How can my team and I make observation a part of every day?
- How do I move beyond surface observations and look for what is underneath the obvious?

You will also

- learn about different lenses or ways of noticing that can be used during your daily work, together with a variety of methods for taking notes and photos.
- think through what you are looking for and how to use the information that you have collected.
- connect these approaches to the early learning curriculum framework in natural and authentic ways, using your relationships with children as one of the cornerstones of your work.

Background Information

"Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before."

—Loris Malaguzzi

In the hubbub of an early learning setting, there are dozens of things to notice and think about. Ideally, these observations are noted in some way, considered, and then some of them (only some!) are acted upon. It is impossible to respond to everything. When you have relationships with children, you know what is significant and what is not. Your own knowledge of the children and their actions from day-to-day will influence what you respond to and how.

In terms of decision-making, what exactly are we observing for? When you observe for program decision-making you are looking for children's ideas, strategies, thinking, engagement, and so on. Of course, you notice children's development at the same time, but your focus on children's actions, ideas and thinking within play will guide what decisions you make in terms of what to do next.

When observing to make decisions you might notice some of the following in children's behaviour:

- Elements of curiosity and questioning. How is curiosity expressed by your infants and toddlers? By your school-aged children?
- Connections between prior experiences (e.g., with their families) and new learning and experiences within the classroom.
- A variety of skills being developed naturally within play.
- The forming of relationships between children, and with adults, the community at large, and materials.
- Many mediums being used to express ideas and knowledge (e.g., speech, acting, art, movement).
- Well-being displayed in many ways, such as friendships, collaboration, and problem-solving.
- The testing of ideas, experimenting with the world, and discovering how things work. This is likely to be a common occurrence across all age groups.
- Representation through play of their languages, cultures, and communities.

The Role of Curiosity

Children are born with a high level of curiosity. It is through curiosity and the many questions it prompts, that they explore and learn.

As an educator, you can benefit from nurturing your own curiosity in your daily practices, such as wondering about what children are doing and asking questions about their play.

You are not expected to have all the answers about what you see, but rather you should be a curious observer, always trying to find out more about children's actions and thinking. Your questions are important to write down, to hold onto, and revisit from time to time.

How can you hold onto your curiosity and questions, so that they are not put aside and forgotten in the busyness of the day? For example, sketch-notebooks are just one way of jotting down interesting events, questions, ideas, and ah-ha moments. They are quick, rough, and on-the-spot.

The resources list at the end of this guide provides links to blogs and articles that highlight other possibilities for writing down what we see and think.

Decision-Making Using Observations

Imagine that you made time to write some rough notes on your observations each day, and it is becoming a regular part of your classroom life. This is a good beginning! What happens now?

As discussed in Module 3: Early Years Practices, the Reflective Planning Cycle can be a useful tool for creating a process to go through in order to reach a decision. It may be valuable to revisit this graphic with staff as a reminder of how this works.

In module 6, will explore reflection and reflective practice in depth. Below are several questions to start your thinking about these topics.

Reflective Questions

- What can you learn from what the children are doing? How does this align with, or differ from, what you knew before?
- How do you use your own curiosity about what children are doing and saying?
- How do you model curiosity for the children in your care?
- What kind of note-taking best suits your practices and ways of being in the classroom?
- How will you use your notes for program planning?

Possible Activities

(Note: See PowerPoint and handouts for more information.)

The activities and discussions that you select for your training sessions depend on your staff, and their individual journeys and contexts. They will all differ in terms of prior knowledge, workplace experiences, training, cultures, and how they work with others. There are a number of ways that you can bring groups together so they can learn from each other; below are a few examples:

- Provide the opportunity for teams to discuss where they are in terms of the Reflective Planning Cycle from collective observations.
- Have individuals list their usual ways of seeing in small groups and using chart paper, with each person using a different colour of marker.
- To start, groups might want to consider if they always notice children's actions through a developmental lens. If they observe through the lens of their own particular interests, such as always noticing literacy or social interaction? We all have biases and preferences in this respect. When debriefing as a whole, brainstorm how everyone might widen their lenses.
- Provide time for staff to discuss the differences and similarities in their training in relation to observing. How can they develop a cohesive approach over time within their work setting(s)?
- Map out daily routines. How much time is available for play? This will make a difference to how much time there is available for educators to observe, since it is during play that children's rich experiences and curiosities can be observed.
- Show short video clips of play in each classroom (two to three minutes). Have the whole group consider what is happening. Use plenty of time for this. Allow enough time for individual reflection and interpretation before bringing the group together to consider ALL the possibilities for response. This process should take time and be slow. If video is not available, photographs from each room about a specific play event can be used.

NEXT STEPS: Putting practices into action

- Consider your role, as a leader, in supporting observation and responsive planning. How can you get into the classroom occasionally—even for a few minutes at a time—to model this approach?
 - Be sure that you and your staff are all familiar with the Reflective Planning Cycle and make it visible in an area where you meet and think together.
 - Take time to observe and think, especially if you are unsure of what to do in response to children's actions (this will often be the case). Situations will often become clearer when you take time to reflect on them. You don't have to have an immediate response.
 - Make the sharing of observations, questions, and curiosities that have come up a regular part of staff meetings. More perspectives can often help someone see things from a different perspective.
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CONNECTIONS TO THE FRAMEWORK

“To be intentional is to act purposefully, with a goal in mind and a plan for accomplishing it. The teacher who can explain why she is doing what she is doing is acting intentionally—whether she is using a strategy tentatively for the first time or automatically from long practice, and whether it is used as part of a deliberate plan or spontaneously in a teachable moment.”

(Epstein 2014, 6)

Observation allows you to co-construct curriculum. When using your observations to plan, you can be confident that you are considering the children's thinking, actions, relationships, and strategies, and that your plans are culturally and linguistically relevant.

The early learning curriculum framework highlights the observation of children at play as a form of authentic assessment. Observation assists educators in developing activities and environments that scaffold children's learning. Observations can be shared with parents when discussing how their child approached an activity, rather than speaking about only one particular area of development.

Daily observations allow for opportunities for educators to be involved and extend play by introducing different materials, intervening in conflict resolution by helping children develop social strategies when needed (e.g., joining a group in play, modelling turn-taking), and engaging in conversations with children.

Module 6: Reflective Practice

Introduction

What is reflective practice? How can it be brought to life in early learning settings? Why it is important? In this module, you will explore how reflective practice connects to the early learning curriculum framework, how to use the Reflective Planning Cycle in your daily work with children, and how to include families in the planning cycle.

You will also

- work through the Reflective Planning Cycle to understand its practicality as a tool for reflection in your work with children.
- understand the difference that reflective practice can make in the quality of your programs.

Background Information

“Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics, and practice. Through their own reflective practice, educators gather information and gain insights that support, inform, and enrich decision-making about children’s learning. As professionals, they examine what happens in their programs, and reflect on what works well and what they might change.”

(Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia’s Early Learning Curriculum Framework 2018, 33)

As an educator, you want what is best for the children in your care, and when you consciously reflect on what you are doing and why, you gain insight into what children are doing and why, and what your own responses might be.

When your reflections are shared with others, such as colleagues, families, and children themselves, everyone becomes part of a community of co-learners, thinking together for the good of the children. This type of sharing requires trust between all the participants and builds a culture of respect as you develop these relationships.

The term reflective practice may be new to some, yet its importance has been acknowledged over the past 20 years and it is a part of almost every early learning framework in Canada and around the world.

In addition to guiding our responses to children, reflective practice also contributes to professional learning for adults. In the PowerPoint presentation you will have learned about

Reflection-in-Action: A naturally occurring practice that happens throughout the day as we observe children. You might consider if the child ever done a particular action before they exhibited it? Should you respond right now?

Reflection-on-Action: A way of looking back on how you responded; if the situation could have been handled differently; or what insights were gained. Often, it is helpful to reflect upon your actions in conversation with your colleagues.

Reflection-for-Action: A type of critical reflection, that examines all aspects of the event from different perspectives.

Think of your Image of the Child. What questions arise for you about the observed play or event? Which questions could be applied to your own practice, with an eye toward future change or professional learning?

When you reflect regularly on what is happening in your classroom(s), you will begin to act with intention, knowing why you are responding in a particular way and being able to articulate this to others.

Reflective Questions

Certain types of questions lend themselves to provoking critical reflection:

- What is my understanding of what I have just observed?
- Who is advantaged when I work in this way? Who is disadvantaged?
- What questions do I have about my work? What am I challenged by? How can I meet these challenges?
- What am I curious about?
- What can I do as an educator to expand this child's experiences and development?
- Are there other theories, knowledge, or points of view that could help me understand better what I have observed or experienced? What are they? How can I find out more? Who do I need to talk to?

Possible Activities

- In teams or small groups, consider what you are already doing in terms of reflective practice. Share these actions with the whole group, verbally, or write them down on chart paper.
- On long pieces of paper, create a timeline or map of how your thinking about your practices has changed over the last decade. What has provoked these changes?
- Using your own daily routine as a guide, and create papers with the headings "Substitute Parent", "Technician", and "Researcher", and note which parts of the day you are acting in each of these roles. During which parts of your day are you a substitute parent? Are you ever a researcher in your classroom? What is the balance between these roles during the day?
- Practice being a "critical friend" (as detailed the PowerPoint presentation), when discussing a photograph of children in action. Ask open-ended and thoughtful questions to get deeper responses about your partner's curiosities, dilemmas, and proud moments. Your job as an active listener is not to solve their challenges, but to be a sounding board: a good listener listens closely, clarifies, offers different viewpoints, and shares their experiences.

NEXT STEPS: Putting practices into action

- Always begin with where you are, and decide where you want to go. What small steps can you take toward beginning or improving your reflective practice?
- Discuss with your team what supports will be needed to engage in reflective practice. How will you obtain these supports? Think in terms of "I could try..." rather than, "Yes, but...". List all of your staff's ideas, even if some of them seem unobtainable at the moment, for future consideration.
- How could your routine provide for reflection-in-action during your day? Do you have note-taking materials around the room? An electronic device you can use?
- Decide upon a way to look back on what has happened during the day. How will you revisit your notes or photographs? Can you find common threads between your observations that will help you to decide on an action?
- Remember the importance of the Reflective Planning Cycle and put it to use. Which parts of this cycle do you already use in your own learning journey? Take time to think about your next step(s).

CONNECTIONS TO THE FRAMEWORK

Reflective practice allows you to build continuity of learning experiences when you, as an educator, build on children's prior and current experiences. When you share your reflections with families, you make children's transitions between home and school more fluid and inclusive. When you include families and communities in thinking together about children, everyone becomes partners in their learning.

Reflective practice also supports you in being intentional. After taking time to think through and discuss what you have observed, you are likely to make wise decisions about your responses. Intentional educators recognize that learning occurs in social contexts and that interactions and conversations are vitally important for learning. Not only does learning occur for children in social contexts, but learning for educators often springs from discussions with others, thereby becoming a form of professional learning.

Collaboration with others, in the form of a reflective community of practice, or simply talking with someone else at your work setting, may lead to change and growth. You might

- reflect on how you are working with a particular child.
- reflect on specific experiences with a child or group of children, and how you responded or might respond.
- seek feedback on interactions with parents.
- seek advice on a specific interaction or how to proceed with a challenge.
- generate ideas for future professional development.
- examine the program's approach to issues such as inclusion and community involvement.

Handouts

Handout 1

The Reflective Planning Cycle

Handout 2

Is Reflection a Part of Your Practice?

Handout 3

Questions to Ponder, from this module's PowerPoint and the Framework

Handout 4

When do you take on the roles of Substitute Parent/Technician/Researcher?

HANDOUT 1

The Reflective Planning Cycle:



You may have seen a similar protocol called The Cycle of Inquiry; this works in the same way as the above graphic, in that educators observe, reflect, raise questions, and respond with further opportunities for the children. Please see additional handouts included in this package.

The Reflective Planning Cycle as a protocol:

A protocol is a system or support to help us move forward with putting ideas or theories into action.

How can we use the graphic on the left – The Reflective Planning Cycle – in our everyday practices?

1. If you do not have a system for how to notice and note what children are doing or saying, this can be a place to begin. What will work for you, on a regular basis?
2. How will you talk with others about what you have noticed? A staff meeting is often a good place, and so are casual conversations throughout the day.
3. Think through how you might respond to what children are doing. There are many choices: A change to environment, further observations or conversations with children, invitations with materials.
4. Put your ideas into action. One small invitation, for instance, will give you another chance to observe.
5. This continued observation will guide you in making decisions. What are the children really exploring? How can you further support them? The Cycle continues...

HANDOUT 2

Is Reflection a Part of Your Practice?

Use the following questions to help you reflect upon what you already do in your setting, and what you might aim to do in the future.

You may think about responding to each question with: *always/sometimes/never/I intend to try this*

1. I am curious about what children are doing, and I am able to form questions about their actions. I write those questions down.
2. I use those questions to help make programme decisions.
3. I use photographs and/or video clips to discuss with my team and gain more insight into what children are doing.
4. I listen carefully to what children are saying amongst themselves as they play; I think about their ideas and views of the world.
5. I take notes in order to remind myself of things that I want to pay attention to.
6. I read my notes and look at my photographs in order to figure out what is significant.
7. I discuss my thoughts with my team members and the whole staff group. We consider many perspectives before making decisions.
8. I create documentation that includes teachers' reflections.
9. I take documentation back to the children for their input.
10. I share my thoughts and ideas with families, and ask for their input.

Susan Stacey, 2019. Adapted from and inspired by: *Reflecting in Communities of Practice*, by Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes, Carter 2013. Published by Redleaf Press.

HANDOUT 3

Questions to Ponder, from this module's PowerPoint and the Framework:

What personal and professional values influence my Image of the Child?

What theories, philosophies and understandings shape and assist my work?

Who is advantaged when I work in this way? Who is disadvantaged?

What am I curious about? What am I confronted or challenged by?

What can I do as an educator to expand this child's experience and development?

HANDOUT 4

When do you take on the roles of Substitute Parent/Technician/Researcher?

Using the chart below, think about when you take on each of these roles within your daily practices. Although we may take on more than one role at the same time, think about your main role during this time.

For instance, you may feel that during arrival time, if a child is upset, you may take on the role of substitute parent for a few minutes.

	SUBSTITUTE PARENT	TECHNICIAN	RESEARCHER
Arrival times			
During play, indoors or outdoors			
On field trips/outings			
At meal times			
During rest times			
At parent meetings			
At staff meetings			
During planning times with your team			
During planned activities with children			

Resources

Module 5: Observation and Decision-Making

Curtis, Deb, and Margie Carter. 2012. *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Provides inspiration and practice for using observation to transform early learning practices.

Curtis, Deb. 2017. *Really Seeing Children*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Exchange Press.

This book can help guide educators into deeper thinking about what they see in children's actions.

Jones, Elizabeth, and Gretchen Reynolds. 1992. *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play*. New York: Teachers College Press.

A classic book examining the roles educators take on as they watch and reflect upon children's play.

Kashin, Diane. 2019. "Technology-Rich Inquiry Based Research." Last modified July 27, 2019.

www.tecibresearch.wordpress.com/.

This blog covers every aspect of child-centred environments, observation, and reflection. There is something for all educators at every stage of their journeys.

Piven, Hanoch. 2012. "Living in a Playful Collage." Filmed December 2012 at TEDxJerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel. Video, 16:02. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e99DuPQ6j8s.

This TEDx talk is engaging and provokes educators to think about their own thinking about play and creativity. It is important to note what he is really talking about, other than collage, such as not seeing what we are expecting to see and many more provocative points.

Stacey, Susan. 2018. *Inquiry-Based Learning Environments: Creating, Supporting, and Collaborating*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

This book explains how to create learning environments that encourage observation, reflection, and responsiveness to children.

The Museum Center for Learning. 2012. "The Wonder of Learning." Filmed May 2012 for the annual convention of the Association for Children's Museums at Opal Public Charter School, Portland, OR. Video, 2:41. www.youtube.com/watch/?v=V0mCy9asVk0.

This video shows the role of play in learning, through the ideas of children in their own voices.

Module 6: Reflective Practice

Carter, Margie, Wendy Cividanes, Deb Curtis, and Debbie Lebo. 2010. "Becoming a Reflective Teacher." *Teaching Young Children* 3, no 4: 1–4.

Carter, Margie, Wendy Cividanes, Deb Curtis, Debbie Lebo. 2013. *Reflecting in Communities of Practice; A Workbook for Early Childhood Educators*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

A practical book with exercises for educators to try. It also includes a self-assessment to help educators understand where they are in their own reflective practice journey.

Dewhurst, Andrea. 2016. "How to Say "Yes" to Children's Ideas." *Journal of Childhood Studies* 41, no 2: 55–59.

Kashin, Diane. 2019. "Where have all the projects gone?" Technology-Rich Inquiry Based Research. Published and last modified March 23, 2019. www.tecibresearch.wordpress.com/2019/03/23/where-have-all-the-projects-gone-musings-about-inquiry-in-early-childhood-education/.

Diane Kashin's blogs are plentiful, relating to many early childhood education topics. All of them are examples of reflective practice, as she ponders why we do what we do.

References

Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. 2018. *Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Province of Nova Scotia. www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/nselcurriculumframework.pdf.

Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. 2018. *Educator's Guide to Capable, Confident, and Curious: Nova Scotia's Early Learning Curriculum Framework*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Province of Nova Scotia. www.ednet.ns.ca/docs/nselcfeducatorsguide.pdf.

Epstein, A. 2014. *The Intentional Teacher—Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning. Revised Edition*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

