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Empowering children in early childhood education to be reflective based on Ignatian pedagogy

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ABSTRACT*Empowering children in early childhood education to be reflective based on Ignatian pedagogy*

In the face of modern civilisation and globalisation, one key educational challenge is to foster reflexivity and critical thinking from an early age. While adolescents are expected to reflect on educational and social issues, children aged 7–10 are rarely supported in developing this competence. Ignatian pedagogy—based on context, experience, action, reflection, and evaluation—emphasises introducing children to reflection in a developmentally appropriate way. This article presents practical methods inspired by the Ignatian model to foster reflection in four areas: conceptual, metacognitive, socio-emotional, and spiritual. Drawing on literature analysis, observation, and educational innovation, the paper shows how early childhood educators can implement reflective activities in daily practice. The teacher's role is crucial, as they model reflective attitudes. Despite the belief that children are not ready for reflection, the article demonstrates that well-designed pedagogical strategies can support the development of reflective habits.

KEYWORDS: reflexivity, early childhood education, Ignatian pedagogy

In a reality dominated by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, a world that synergizes the real and the virtual, reflexivity is an essential competence. In the document *The definition and selection of key competences published by the OECD, reflexivity has been called the 'heart of key competences'* (OECD, 2010, p. 8) It seems that the reflexivity of students is equally important in the era of artificial intelligence and access to the Internet where gaining knowledge is easier than ever. However, at the same time, it is critical thinking and reflexivity that allows us to distinguish opinions from facts and to build a network of interconnections between them. In the analyses undertaken, it is assumed that an important role of the teacher from the early childhood stage is to form key competences, including reflexivity, in their pupils. Setting the analyses in the context of Ignatian pedagogy, it was assumed that adopting the Ignatian model of education gives the teacher the tools, as well as the theoretical basis and practical approach, to develop this important competence in pupils.

The topic of reflexivity in education is present in the studies of didactics and early childhood education literature, and there are also studies that deal with teachers' (Szymczak, 2017) or university students' (Perkowska-Klejman, 2014) reflections. It seems that relatively little is said about the reflexivity of pre-school and early school-age children, so the aim of this article is to present

methods and forms of working with early school-age children that are to support and help implement them into reflexivity. The specific context for the analyses in the article will be the Ignatian model of education.

An understanding of reflectivity is adopted based on reflective thinking as outlined by John Dewey (1938, 2002) and reflective practice as outlined by Donald Schön (1987). In relating the role of reflection in the Ignatian educational model, reference was made to two documents: *Characteristics of Jesuit Education from 1986* and *Ignatian Pedagogy. A Practical Approach from 1993* (Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej, 2006).

Reflection and reflexivity in education

The distinction between the terms “reflection” and “reflexivity” is given, among others, by Ewa Dębska (Dębska, 2020, pp. 26–27). Reflection is related to a person’s thoughts about the things experienced. Reflexivity, on the other hand, ‘can be understood as a cognitive activity conditioned by the undertaking of reflection and as a reflexive, repetitive (reflexive) act’. (Dębska, 2020, p. 27). The author draws attention to the semantic difference between the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’, but also notes that in the literature, these terms are often treated interchangeably.

The concepts of reflection and reflexivity are quite complex. Reflection is the cognitive activity of becoming aware of one’s thinking and actions and analysing them in depth (Perkowska-Klejman, 2013). In Dewey’s terms (Dewey, 2002), reflection is closely related to learning and practice. Human beings do not learn from experience, but from reflection on experience. Moreover, Dewey clearly contrasts reflective thinking with routine thinking, typical of so-called traditional teaching, based on upholding tried and tested methods, guided by external authorities. Hence also the contrast between the ‘traditional school’ and the ‘new education’, which is based on the belief that the learning process is not based on past knowledge, but on the use of present educational experiences (Dewey 2002). Furthermore, Dewey strongly emphasises the importance of creating a structured thought chain, to which reflection leads. “Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors. The successive portions of the reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another; they do not

come and go in a medley. Each phase is a step from some thing to something technically speaking; it is a term of thought. Each term leaves a deposit which is used in the next term. The stream or flow becomes a train, chain, or thread” (Dewey, 1910, p. 2-3).

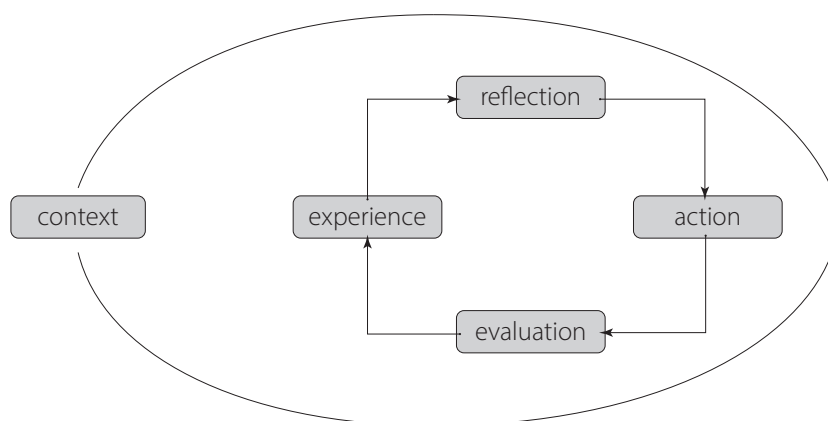
In addition, some of Piaget’s views fit into the model of reflective learning. From his observations of children, he concluded that the way a child thinks is age-related, is not innate, but is shaped by acquired experience – the interaction between the person and the environment (Piaget, 1966). Therefore, despite the fact that some researchers believe that reflection does not characterise a child’s way of thinking, but that it requires the individual to be mature in terms of intellectual transactions (Dębska, 2020, p. 28), it seems that, based on Piaget’s observations, we can assume that a child living in an environment that prioritises reflexivity and being among reflexive teachers is more likely to implement such reflexive thinking, learning and even creating structures of his or her personality.

Importance of reflection in Ignatian pedagogy

Ignatian pedagogy, which has its roots in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, presupposes the formation of the person in his or her wholeness (Dybowska, 2013; Kolvenbach, 1992). This ideal of holistic development is explained in two documents: *Characteristics of Jesuit Education* (1986) and *Ignatian Pedagogy. A Practical Approach* (1993). As a result of the reflection on educational practice, the handbook *Learning by Refraction* (Atienza & Go, 2023) was produced as a practical guide to Ignatian pedagogy. What Ignatian pedagogy emphasises is putting the learner at the centre of the educational process and the learner’s independence in exploring new knowledge through experience and reflection. The learning process depends more on active participation than on passive reception. The path to this active participation includes personal study, the opportunity for personal discovery and creativity, and an attitude of reflection (Charakterystyczne cechy jezuickiego wychowania, 45). The teacher’s role is to help the pupil become autonomous by organising the educational space in such a way that it creates the conditions for new experiences and reflection, which allows the pupil to perceive different aspects of phenomena and to perceive known-unknown things in a new way in order to react in a thoughtful and adapted way to the situation (Chrost, 2021; Dybowska, 2022).

Reflection is an integral part of the Ignatian pedagogy (education) model. It is seen as a fundamental element that dynamises the learning process (Pedagogia ignacjańska. Podejście praktyczne, 31). The term reflection here means the careful consideration of a certain topic, experience, idea, task or spontaneous reaction in order to be able to grasp their meanings more fully. Reflection is thus the process by which meaning is extracted from human experience (Pedagogia ignacjańska. Podejście praktyczne, 49).

Figure 1. Ignatian pedagogy (education) model



Source: Pedagogia ignacjańska. Podejście praktyczne, 68; Marek, 2021, Marek & Walulik, 2022.

The model of teaching based on memorisation of knowledge and more activity of the teacher than of the pupil is insufficient in Jesuit schools. According to the Ignatian principle of *magis* (Dybowska, 2013, 2022; Marek, 2021), the learner is expected to transcend the simple memorisation of facts in favour of understanding, the application of knowledge and the ability to analyse and synthesise it. Dewey wrote that “if our schools turn out their pupils in that attitude of mind which is conducive to good judgement in any department of affairs in which the pupils are placed, they have done more than if they sent out their pupils merely possessed of vast stores of information, or high degrees of skill in specialised branches” (Dewey, 1910, p. 101). Reflection allows pupils to grow as competent, aware and responsive individuals to the changes occurring.

In Ignatian pedagogy, with regard to reflection, its relationship to experience is strongly emphasised. It is assumed that a person learns by reflecting

on experiences, but reflection also includes some experiences – intellectual, emotional and spiritual. Reflection, in the Ignatian educational model, is also strongly linked to action. The pupil is not supposed to stop only at intellectual or emotional reflection, but this reflection is supposed to lead him or her to action – to put into practice what he or she has learned about the world or about himself or herself.

Proposals for activities to make students reflective

Adopting the assumptions of Ignatian pedagogy leads to the creation of an educational and upbringing model in which the teacher himself undertakes reflection on his actions both in the educational and upbringing spheres, and more broadly on his development and ideals of life, which will allow him to accompany his pupils and care for their holistic development according to the principle of *cura personalis*, which means personal care and a personal approach to each pupil (Casalini, 2021; Dybowska, 2013).

Such an assumption requires a remodelling of the role of the teacher and the relationship he or she creates with the student. This is a change from seeing the role of the teacher at the centre of the classroom, whose main method of teaching is the lecture, giving homework consisting of completing page after page of exercises, and whose tools for verifying knowledge and possibly disciplining are tests and midterms. Learning with understanding through reflection and action cannot be based solely on lectures, working with textbooks and completing exercises or worksheets. The role of the learner cannot be seen as one who is a spectator, expected to absorb knowledge like a sponge and is a specific ‘product’ to be produced by the teacher’s actions (Tapscott, 2009). In the Ignatian pedagogy model, it is the learner who is the creator of his or her knowledge. The teacher cannot directly lead the learner to understanding; he or she can only create teaching and learning situations, teach the learner to reflect and support the learner in his or her access to knowledge. This is what lies at the heart of Ignatian pedagogy, called by some researchers a pedagogy of accompaniment (Marek, 2021).

This is especially true for the early childhood education teacher, who not only cares for the intellectual development of the pupil but also has a great influence on the emotional, social and spiritual development of the child. It is therefore worthwhile to implement reflection at the very beginning of a child’s school

journey. It is worth creating teaching and educational situations that will enable the learners to reflect on their lives, their role in society, their emotions and feelings, but most of all on the skills and knowledge they acquire, and – which is very important nowadays – on the ways of acquiring knowledge and skills, the processes that lead to the acquisition of knowledge and the techniques of remembering information, consolidating it and creating networks between information that make it possible to use the knowledge acquired in practice.

The following section describes methods and forms of introducing children to reflection and development through reflection in early childhood education implemented by a teacher who works based on the Ignatian model of education at the Jesuit Education Centre (Jezuickie Centrum Edukacji) in Nowy Sącz. The methods and forms of introducing children to reflection are grouped into four spheres/levels: conceptual, metacognitive, social (emotional) and spiritual (religious) (Atienza & Go, 2023).

Conceptual reflection

Conceptual reflection is related to the educational sphere and makes it possible to connect the topic being explored with the knowledge already possessed, to systematise it and also to put it into practice (Atienza & Go, 2023). The teacher's task is first to ask the right questions – questions that make the students look at the topic under discussion in a broader perspective (Pedagogia ignacjańska. Podejście praktyczne, 55). It is therefore important to ask key questions in such a way that they arouse curiosity (e.g. 'What does an orange have in common with a music note?' – a question for a lesson on the rhythmic value of music notes) and the setting of objectives and criteria for lessons or individual tasks – initially by the teacher and later by the learners themselves.

An important aspect of implementing reflexivity is also obtaining information from pupils about what they already know about a topic, in the form of brainstorming or pupil questions. This allows students to engage more deeply in networking – new knowledge with what they already know about the topic.

Conceptual (cognitive) reflection is also, and perhaps above all, enabled by active methods and forms of work. Every task that awakens the child's activity, allows him or her to create, to search for solutions and to arrive at knowledge and skills, implements reflexivity and reflection: what do I know, what have I learned new and how can I use it? Therefore, although it may not be easy,

especially at the beginning of the first grade, it is very necessary and worth the effort to involve children in creating their own notes (it is helpful to teach children the basics of sketchnoting (Karczmarzyk, 2015), lapbooks, or mind maps. In addition, children are often the creators of tasks – closed-type tasks where there is only one correct answer should be avoided, in favour of tasks that the children themselves come up with – either for each other or as ‘experts’ in a certain field. It is also a good idea to give children interdisciplinary tasks, challenging and involve them on many levels, e.g:

Figure 2. Example of a reflection-provoking task

Please make a note (in any way you like – it can be a written note, arrows, dots) in your Polish lesson notebook about a selected national park in Poland. The note should include:

- a drawing of the park’s logo/beam
- information about the location, size, year of establishment, and animal and plant species present
- possible interesting facts about the selected park
- among the animals and plants of the given park find 3 names with spelling difficulty, write them down in alphabetical order and then explain the spelling rule (if there is a rule).
- with each animal or plant, form a sentence containing at least: one count, one adjective and one verb. E.g., bison – two stately bison are lying on the grass.
- please find a mathematical task related to your chosen national park. The task could be about the distance from some place, the difference in temperature, the weight of some animal, and the time of the visit.

I am counting on your creativity. ;-)

Working with the project method is also very important, in which the teacher, instead of imparting knowledge, helps to discover it and also creates a friendly atmosphere and favours group work over individual work, using active learning strategies and techniques (Marek, 2016), working in groups and in pairs – allows the child to reflect – how to put a topic into words, not only to exhaust it, but also so that it is understandable to a colleague.

An important method of working with students is 'Ignatian repetition', i.e. periodic repetition of acquired knowledge and skills, but not in the form of a simple recall of the material learnt, but rather the practical application of what has been learnt in relation to the learner's own reflection – what has intrigued or discouraged the pupil in a given piece of subject matter. Ignatian repetition can take a variety of forms – sometimes tests, but with questions that require the student to use, to put into practice, the knowledge they have gained (Dybowska, 2013). Sometimes they are presentations, papers, lapbooks that summarise some larger section, combining knowledge from different areas. The best form of such a repetition is an open lesson or presentation to other classes. It allows students not only to repeat and apply the knowledge they have acquired, but also to share their knowledge with others and to communicate it in such a way that the largest possible group of recipients gains some new knowledge or a new perspective on the information they already have.

Metacognitive reflection

Metacognitive reflection is also related to the intellectual sphere, but focuses on learning about the learning itself, the actions taken and the processes involved that make learning possible (Atienza & Go, 2023). 'Learning' is one of the key skills. Implementing reflection on one's own learning processes, the best ways of acquiring knowledge and learning styles, is very important, especially for children in early childhood, who are only at the beginning of their educational journey and who, on the other hand, neglect in this sphere often leads to school failure in the older grades. In Ignatian pedagogy, this kind of reflection is particularly important and emphasised because it is important to learn. But it is even more important to learn how to learn and to desire to learn throughout life (*Charakterystyczne cechy jezuickiego wychowania*, 46).

The implementation of metacognitive reflection is fostered above all by the use of feedback, formative assessment, self-assessment and peer assessment based on previously developed objectives and assessment criteria (the student reflects on whether he or she has met all the criteria and also gets feedback that helps him or her to realistically assess his or her knowledge gain). The collection of reflections – in various forms – after the completion of a topic, task or unit is also helpful in evaluating learning processes. The learners not only reflect on the knowledge and skills they have acquired but also on what helped

and what disturbed them in their learning, so they become increasingly aware of their learning style, their strengths and weaknesses. Pupils can also keep a portfolio or binder in which written assignments, tests or other important and valuable work is placed in chronological order, which shows the progress made by the teacher, parents and the pupil himself. Finally, an excellent way to allow the student to reflect on his or her learning is to organise tripartite meetings: Pupil–Parent–Teacher. At this meeting, the pupil talks about his/her own learning, what he/she is good at and what he/she still needs to work on. Usually, the student prepares for the meeting by looking through his/her portfolio or notebook, finding work he/she is particularly proud of and topics he/she finds particularly difficult. During a discussion with the parent and teacher, he or she can reflect together with the adults on what to do to learn effectively and overcome difficulties. The important thing is that the pupil undertakes this reflection independently, and the teacher only ensures that the conclusions are correct.

Personal, social and emotional reflection

Personal reflection is related to self-knowledge and self-education, as well as discovering one's place in society and the role the pupil, as an individual, can play – how he or she can influence the world by reflecting on the value of what he or she has learned in relation to his or her life and the external world (Atienza & Go, 2023). In the Ignatian model, educating for gratitude, justice, and service to others in society plays a particularly important role (Charakterystyczne cechy jezuickiego wychowania, 82). Hence, it is particularly important to encourage children to reflect – first on their emotions, their strengths and weaknesses – through various workshops and activities and appropriately selected readings, so that the student can discover and name his emotions and know how to deal with them – what way of expressing them is safe and socially acceptable.

Another sphere in which it is important for pupils to be able to reflect is the sphere of social interaction – both in the classroom and at school, during lessons, activities and celebrations, but also during free play, during breaks, on the sports field or on excursions. For the teacher following the Ignatian educational model, this is a particularly important task – to create a community out of a group of first-graders – so that everyone feels that he or she belongs to

this class, can feel comfortable in it, accepts others and is accepted in his or her uniqueness and differences. In other words, one should strive to build unity in diversity. Here again, this cannot be achieved by one's own direct action; one can only give pupils tools that help them to reflect on group interaction, social responsibility and building a class community. Circle meetings in particular serve this purpose, not only in situations of conflict or problems but also in planned, weekly meetings focusing on selected aspects of class life. Reflection is also fostered through mini-projects, such as the 'silent friend' project, where children draw a person for whom they are supposed to be a 'friend' for the whole week, but cannot say who they have drawn. Throughout the project, reflection is undertaken on what it means to be a 'silent friend', what is difficult about it, what could be done better and, above all, whether one has felt the action of a 'silent friend', and whether one has made someone feel that one is their 'silent friend'.

Another way of building respect for diversity and sharing one's talents is through talent days, when children prepare a presentation about their hobbies or talents. Often the children spontaneously reflect on the fact that some do better in school, in Polish or maths, and others do less well, but have other talents, such as playing football, knitting or dancing. This is an opportunity to talk to the children – about the fact that everyone is good at something, but no one is better or worse than anyone else – we are different, we have different talents and this is enriching.

Finally, what probably comes the hardest these days is educating for gratitude. However, there are opportunities for children to undertake reflection in this area too. A good way to do this is to create a gratitude board or jar, where children can write what they are particularly grateful for today. It is important to let the children know that there are no 'wrong' answers with the children also not being forced, but encouraged to leave a mark.

A well-liked way for children to undertake reflections on classroom events is to have 'grey hours' to summarise in a circle on the last lesson of the week what has happened in our classroom. Sometimes the aim is to complete a sentence, e.g. 'Today I am thankful for...' or 'I am sad because...', and sometimes the children say what they want to share with the group. The rule is that the person who is currently holding the candle or other thing has the floor. Here, too, there is no compulsion – if a child doesn't want to say anything, they hold the candle for a while and pass it on in silence. This method is great for awakening social reflection. In this way, children have the chance to hear the voices of their peers,

to see that everyone has their own needs, but also that it is sometimes useful to look at different social situations from a point of view other than one's own.

Spiritual/religious reflection

This type of reflection is most commonly understood in connection with religion and spirituality. In Ignatian pedagogy, which leads to the discovery of God in all things, it forms an important part of education and upbringing. Religious and spiritual formation is an integral part of Jesuit education. It is not some addition to the educational process or something detached from it (Charakterystyczne cechy jezuickiego wychowania, 34) Ignatian pedagogy, as a pedagogy of accompaniment, is part of one of the contemporary currents of the pedagogy of religion (Marek, 2021), and therefore the adoption of the Ignatian model of education results in developing in children also a sensitivity to matters of religion and spirituality. At the Jesuit Education Centre, this task is possible because spirituality and religiosity accompany the pupils in the everyday reality of school. The teacher's role is first to enable pupils to participate and accompany them in religious practices and events such as Easter breakfast, Christmas Eve, retreats, prayer or the rosary at break time.

Encouraging spiritual reflection is also facilitated by correlating the school year with the liturgical year, providing appropriate equipment and talking about, for example, the liturgical season and the practices arising from it. A good way to deepen the experience of Advent or Lent is to implement a project, such as the Advent or Lenten tasks, which enable the children to actively prepare for the festivities and to reflect more deeply on the nature of religious events.

An important event for children in early childhood education is joining their First Holy Communion, preceded by a retreat specially prepared for them, which enables them to gain a deeper understanding of the mysteries of faith. Activities can also be undertaken in this area that enable children to reflect on this event. This could be talking about the topic, making artwork showing what is most important to them in receiving communion, watching films, adapted to the age of the children, which show God's action in human life, preparing songs, accompanying the children to the solemn First Communion Mass, or finally, organising a post-Communion pilgrimage. These are activities that

make it possible to accompany the children to this important event and also to awaken a deeper reflection on religious formation.

Conclusions

In early childhood education, the teacher plays a major role in efforts to implement reflexivity. On the one hand, his/her situation is advantageous due to the integrated nature of teaching. It is easy to undertake and induce reflection in cross-curricular correlations, without the constraints of being divided into different subjects in the older grades. Also a beneficial factor is the amount of time the early childhood education teacher spends with the pupils. This makes it possible to get to know the pupil well, to accompany him or her on his or her development, and to observe the reflections undertaken by the child. On the other hand, it is not possible to implement reflection on the pupils unless the teachers themselves are in the habit of reflecting on their work, their working methods and forms, their development, or the values and ideals that guide them in life. In addition, another difficulty for some teachers is the often prevalent myth of the low reflective capacity of early childhood children, as well as the attachment to the traditional model of education, in which the child is 'human material' to be shaped appropriately rather than an independent and reflective individual. In adopting the Ignatian model of education, the teacher should also accept the implications of this model. The teacher can accompany the child, and to a certain extent can be his guide on the educational path, but one does not have a direct influence on the construction of the pupil's knowledge and emotional and social competences.

The period of 7–12 years marks the rapid development of cognitive abilities, as well as the independence of thought processes. Therefore, it is worthwhile to implement children's reflexivity, as they are already ready for it and, in addition, practising certain competences reinforces their application. These activities on the part of the teacher are continuous, planned and purposeful. The effects of the implemented activities vary as not all children develop reflexivity equally.

The implementation of reflexivity in early childhood remains a space for further exploration. Particular attention should be paid to the factors that positively influence the effectiveness of introducing reflexivity. An interesting area of research could be to undertake longitudinal studies on the impact of the

implementation of reflexivity in early childhood based on the Ignatian model of education on their educational success in subsequent educational stages.

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