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# **An exploration of the value of reflective practice for child care and family support service provision**

A thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD to  
National University of Ireland, Galway.

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## **Abstract**

In the context of delivering child care and family support service provision in the Republic of Ireland the concept of reflective practice enjoys almost unquestionable positive acclaim within the extensive literature and amongst practitioners. The use of reflective practice is widely regarded by child care professionals as a positive approach that can enhance practice, inform professional development and ultimately improve the quality of service provision and interventions. From a policy perspective a number of key policy documents, for example - *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook* (2007), consider the use of reflective practice an essential component to achieving good practice. Similarly, the extensive practice literature in relation to social work and child care practice reinforce this perspective. However, as a theoretical and conceptual entity there is little empirical research or evidence to substantiate the perceived multiple benefits that result from using the reflective approach. The aim of this research study is to address this gap in the research literature and explore the value of using reflective practice from the perspective of practitioners and managers who use the approach.

A mixed method triangulated approach was used in undertaking this research study. This methodological approach included base-line and follow-up interviews with twenty practitioners and interviews with ten service managers. The study also included the use of an action research component. This approach was employed to elicit the views of practitioners implementing the Johns model of structured reflection in the context of a structured practice environment created by the action research process.

Findings from this research study confirm the many positive benefits that accrue from using reflective practice as illustrated in the extensive literature. However, this research study has also highlighted a number of issues that prohibit the effective use of reflective practice by child care professionals. Inadequate training, for example, has resulted in many practitioners having only a notional understanding of the concept and the theoretical approach that underpins the use of reflective practice. This lack of informed understanding was particularly evident in the area of critical reflective practice and the

absence of critical awareness evident among practitioners interviewed. These identified deficits have resulted in the process not being used to its full potential. There are also identifiable gaps in how practitioners are supported in their use of reflective practice. This was most notable in relation to the area of formal supervision, where findings from this research study highlight deficits in the use of the reflective methodology. Finally, this research study has identified the importance and advantages of using a structured approach, such as the action research framework, to more effectively and routinely implement reflective practice and maximise the use of the process to its fullest potential. Indeed, findings from this research study have highlighted that it is insufficient in itself to equip practitioners with reflective tools. Practitioners equally require supportive structures to reinforce and perpetuate consistent and effective reflective practice.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## ***Introduction***

The importance of reflective practice in child care service provision is widely acknowledged within the current literature (Knott et al., 2007; Dolan et al., 2006; Rolfe et al., 2011; Redmond. 2006; Fook et al., 2007; White et al., 2006; Webber et al., 2010). As noted by Dolan et al. (2006), reflective practice is based on a mixture of description and questioning informed by action and leading to change for the individual and the social context. Expanding on this point, Thompson (2008) notes that the delivery of social work services incorporates an intellectual dimension which requires practitioners to employ sharp analytical and reflective skills to unravel presenting complexity, uncertainty and risk. Learning from experience, and recognising that each individual and family situation is different, necessitates that the use of reflective practice is an ongoing practice characteristic which should permeate all professional practice. No two families are the same and one size does not fit all in terms of practice interventions. As noted by Gray et al. (2009), practice is not a static entity but requires ongoing reflection and re-evaluation to take account of changing approaches and perspectives. In the context of this Irish national policy, the use of reflective practice is endorsed by one of the primary child care policy initiatives, the Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook (2007). This policy promotes the use of reflective practice to encompass a whole-child perspective while also promoting reflective inter-agency co-operation at all levels of organisational structure and practice in the best interests of children and families.

The extensive literature available in relation to reflective practice provides unequivocal support and endorsement for the approach and acknowledges the multiple benefits that accrue from its use. Indeed, as noted by Finlay (2008, p.2): "*In practice, reflective practice is often seen as the bedrock of professional identify*". Nevertheless, there are many identifiable examples in the public domain in both Ireland and the U.K of unreflective, or as Thompson (2008) notes, 'mindless' practice in child care service provision. The evidence illustrating examples of this unreflective practice is most starkly highlighted in the numerous child death and abuse enquiry reports in the public domain

over the last two decades. These enquiry reports will be referred to in the main body of this thesis. They incorporate multiple examples of professional negligence, unreflective practice and, on occasions, an almost thoughtless approach to the discharge of professional practice and duty of care. Despite the gravity of the issues raised, and the repercussions for the families and children involved in these inquiry reports, further lapses in professional practice are possible if a consistent reflective approach is not adopted by each professional. It should be noted of course that there are many examples of good practice and high standards of professional practice being maintained by the vast majority of child care practitioners. However, there is a necessity to promote the importance of ongoing reflective practice to enhance and improve the quality of child care service provision.

Despite the positivity afforded to the concept of reflective practice in the literature and the multiple benefits accredited to its use, there is little empirical evidence available supporting the effectiveness of using reflective practice or indeed exploring the perceived practice value of using the process. This point is noted by White et al. (2006.p.19) who observe: *“Furthermore, there is little empirical research seeking to identify the changes brought about by reflection, or outcomes of the process...”*. Some observers such as Ixer (1999) have questioned the very existence of the reflective process owing to this lack of empirical validation of the approach. This research study endeavours to address this gap in the research and provide novel insight and new understandings in relation to the reflective methodology. In addition, the study will also evaluate the benefits of using the reflective approach from the perspective of front-line practitioners and managers who employ the process in the context of child care service provision.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will broadly set out the background to the study and the context in which reflective practice is used. The second section presents the overarching aims and objectives of the study. Finally, the third section of the chapter presents a lay out of the thesis overall and provides the reader with a break-down of chapter content.

## ***1. Background to the research study***

The concept of reflective practice is very positively perceived within the extensive literature in this area. There is an evident consensus in the literature to suggest that using reflection can assist practice and enhance the delivery of service interventions. This positivity is not, however, matched by levels of training available to practitioners. As a result what is understood by reflective practice can vary considerably (Fook et al., 2006). This absence of training has resulted in many practitioners having only a notional understanding of the reflective methodology. There is also a disconnect apparent between training, policy, and the effective implementation of reflective practice. If the reflective approach is to permeate professional practice, then a more systemic approach to training and the structured use of reflective practice needs to be developed otherwise the approach may not be utilised to its fullest potential.

I have worked as a social work practitioner and service manager for over twenty years across a continuum of child care services. These services have included child protection, children-in-care, residential care and family support. My interest in this area of research is informed by a belief that professional child care practice is an ongoing and evolving process where continuous professional development and learning can be significantly influenced by the use of reflective practice. I believe that professional learning and development, as noted by Gray et al. (2009), is not a static entity but rather a perpetual learning process. Learning and the potential to enhance professional practice prevails in every single encounter with a family or young person or indeed with another professional. In addition, I am also of the view that professional learning and best practice in the area of child care service provision is directly linked to the adoption of a reflective approach. Finally, my interest and rationale for undertaking this research study is motivated by a desire to address a gap in the existing research literature in relation to the theoretical concept of reflective practice. It is acknowledged in the current literature that the empirical value of the reflective entity is essentially under-researched White et al (2006). Therefore, in undertaking this study it is hoped to address this gap

and add to the existing body of knowledge in this area. It is specifically anticipated that, through exploring the concept of reflective practice, through the lens of front line practitioners, that a more enhanced and empirically informed understanding regarding the value of using reflective practice will be apparent. In addition it is hoped that through employing an action research methodology a better understanding in relation to the mechanics and problem-solving potential inherent in the reflective approach will result. An additional rationale in undertaking this research study is to promote the use of reflective practice by illuminating the conceptual links to learning theory and thereby make a stronger connection between the use of reflective theory and practice. Ultimately, in undertaking this research study it is hoped to subject the theoretical concept of reflective practice to objective critical analysis and emerge with a better understanding regarding the potential applied value of the approach in the context of child care service provision.

### ***1.1 Organisational Context***

The provision of child and family services is currently undergoing the most comprehensive structural reform ever undertaken in Ireland. On the 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2014 the Child and Family Agency, hereafter referred to as TUSLA, became the independent legal entity set up under the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013 to be responsible for the protection and well-being of children. TUSLA took over responsibility for the provision of children and family services previously administered by the Health Service Executive. Adopting a new identity, TUSLA introduced a re-structuring and re-alignment programme to incorporate a broad range of child care services including; child protection and welfare, alternative care, pre-school and early years services, education and welfare, family resource centres and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services. TUSLA is responsible for a combined staff of approximately four thousand allied child care professionals with an operational budget of six hundred million euro per annum. It is anticipated that the remit of TUSLA will further expand in the future to include child psychiatry, psychology and public health nursing. It is in this organisational context that social work and family support practitioners are employed to engage and support families in Ireland. The four thousand social work and child care

staff employed by TUSLA are similar, in terms of qualifications and job specifications, to the research participants who took part in this research study.

For the purposes of contextualizing this specific research study it should be noted that statutory child care services, during the course of the research study, were located in the pre-January 2014 organisational structures of the Health Service Executive. (Child care services now come under the legal remit of the Child & Family Agency - Tusla).

Child care professionals who are employed in the statutory sector in the Republic of Ireland are tasked with a variety of duties and responsibilities and are mandated under the Child Care Act (1991). Social workers, for example, have specific responsibility for child protection. This area of intervention includes undertaking child protection investigations, assessing risk and, as an intervention of last resort, placing children in care. Family support or social care practitioners are involved in preventative family support interventions and working with families facing adversity or where, for example, parenting support is required. As noted by Skehill (2003, p.146), the primary distinction between social workers and social care workers lies in the former holding primary responsibility for child protection. Social care workers, nonetheless, also have a pivotal role in the provision of care, protection and support to vulnerable families and children. Family Support and social care practitioners undertake assessments and provide individual and family support interventions. Social care practitioners further develop interventions and provide supports which can negate the need for children to enter the care system. In many instances, social care practitioners utilise the same skill-set as that used by social workers.

It should also be noted that all child care practitioners who are employed in either the voluntary or statutory sector hold professional third level qualifications. In the case of social workers this qualification is the Masters of Social Work, and in the case of child care workers or youth workers, the relevant professional qualification is the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Applied Social Care or a third level youth work qualification.

Turning now to the organisational context where the research study took place. This research study took place in a rural geographical county located in the West of Ireland. This rural area had a population size of approximately one hundred and thirty thousand people (census 2010). The geographical area was demarcated by county boundaries (there are twenty six counties in the Republic of Ireland) and further situated within one of four Health Service Executive regional areas.

Local organisational child care structures had evolved and developed within this area since the inception of the previous Health Board structure which existed in the early nineteen seventies. Statutory child care services were organised and sub-divided into three geographical patch areas within the county. Each patch has a separate office location and staff complement and provided child care services to the population within that designed area.

Child care services within these designated county boundaries were typically organised under three main domains or pillars of care: child protection, children-in-care and family support. The local child care management structure consisted of one Child Care Manager who maintained overall management responsibility for all child care services in the area. A Principal Social Worker had operational responsibility for child protection while another Principal Social Worker supervised the children-in-care service. A Family Support Manager had overall responsibility for the delivery of family support services in the area. Each of the three local teams was supervised by a Social Worker Team leader who reported in turn to the Principal Social Worker.

In addition to the statutory child care services provided in this area a number of voluntary organisations also provided family support services. These included: youth organisations, a range of voluntary child welfare, and family support services and services that support women who experience domestic and gender-based violence. During the period of this research study there was a total of ninety child care practitioners employed by both statutory and voluntary organisations in this geographical area.

The twenty practitioners and ten service managers who participated in the research study were drawn from these statutory and voluntary services. These research respondents were employed in both child protection, children-in-care and family support services. The managers who participated in the research study had a direct supervisory relationship with the twenty child care practitioners who participated in the study. All research participants worked in the delivery of front line services in the local area.

### ***1.2 Aims and objectives of the research study***

The overall aim of this research study is to explore the value of using reflective practice in the context of social work and family support service provision. In particular, this research study will explore where practitioners use reflective practice and how they perceive its value. This study will also examine specific areas of practice where one would reasonably expect the reflective approach to be employed, for example in professional supervision. In particular, this research study seeks to elicit the views of practitioners and managers regarding their use of the reflective methodology while also seeking to ascertain their understanding of the approach. In addition, the study seeks to identify the value of employing a reflective approach from the perspective of practitioners while exploring both the enabling factors that precipitate the use of reflective practice. This study also explores the barriers that restrict and prohibit the use of reflective practice. Finally, this research study seeks to examine the implementation of an identified reflective model through the use of a structured action research framework. This aspect of the study specifically seeks to explore the advantages of utilising a structured approach to reflective practice.

### ***1.3 Research questions***

- (1) How is the concept of reflective practice understood and used in the context of child care service provision?
- (2) What is the value of using reflective practice in child care service provision?

### ***1.4 Research objectives***

1. To elicit the views and experiences of practitioners who utilise reflective practice in the development of interventions with young people and families.
2. To elicit the views of service managers who supervise practitioners involved in the research study, in relation to reflective practice.
3. To compare the effectiveness of implementing a structured model of reflective practice (Johns model) using an action research and non-action research methodology.

In order to address the overarching research questions and research objectives, I collated the views and perspectives of twenty child care practitioners and ten service managers regarding their use and understanding of reflective practice. In addition, the study also explored the benefits of using a reflective journal as an aid to assist practitioners in their use of reflective practice. The study also incorporates an action research component. This comparative component of the study explores the use of reflective practice in the context of a structured and unstructured practice environment.

In adopting this methodological approach, the study incorporates a number of key strengths. Firstly, the study elicits the views of front-line practitioners and managers regarding their empirical use of reflective practice. The study further elicits their views in relation to using the reflective approach in the context of an authentic practice setting. Evaluating the benefits of using reflective practice in child care addresses a gap in the existing literature and research, as highlighted specifically by Ixer (1999). This research study presents an opportunity to address this gap and develop new understanding in this area. Finally, using an action research approach provides an opportunity to gain direct insight and understanding in relation to the mechanics of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment. Using an action research approach also provides an opportunity to examine and evaluate the value of using reflective practice and, thereby, address the overarching research questions.

## ***1.5 Layout of the Thesis***

The remaining chapters in this thesis are divided into seven chapters. In Chapter Two I set out a comprehensive review of the literature relating to the theoretical concept of reflective practice. This chapter includes an overview regarding the theoretical origins of the reflective methodology and chronicles the evolutionary development of the reflective approach. In this chapter I also set out how the concept of reflective practice is defined in the literature while further illustrating the diversity and variation between the concepts of reflective practice, reflexivity and critical reflective practice. This chapter also incorporates the various reflective models and processes that have been developed to assist in the use of a reflective methodology. In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed outline of the methodological approach used in undertaking the research study. This chapter sets out the rationale, aims and objectives of the research study. My own philosophical orientation of critical theory is also presented in this chapter. A substantive portion of chapter three is used to set out the research design and the methods used in conducting the study. I also elaborate on the qualitative approach used and detail how the process of qualitative triangulation is employed to further analyse different sources of data collated. This chapter also outlines the grounded theory approach used in the study to assist in analysing and making sense of the data. Finally, this chapter sets out the ethical considerations identified in undertaking the research study.

Findings in relation to this research study are set out in three separate chapters. In Chapter Four, findings are presented in relation to how practitioners define and understand the concept of reflective practice. In this chapter, findings are also presented in relation to how practitioners report using the reflective approach. In Chapter Five, findings are presented in relation to three main areas: the benefits of using reflective practice as outlined in practitioner accounts, the enabling factors that assist practitioners in their use of reflective practice, and the reported barriers that prohibit or prevent practitioners from using reflective practice. In Chapter Six, findings are set out in relation to the action research component of the study. This chapter deals with findings

on how the action research methodology was used to implement the Johns model of reflective practice in the context of a structured practice setting.

In Chapter Seven, the research findings are discussed in the context of the research aims and objectives. This chapter considers the value of using reflective practice and the importance of practice being informed by theory. This chapter also considers factors that can positively influence the implementation of reflective practice. The positive influence and significance of using reflective practice in the context of a structured framework are also considered in this chapter. Chapter Seven further sets out and discusses a number of identified deficits in relation to the reported use of reflective practice including the areas of assessment, relationship-based practice, the use of critical theory, the absence of training and the non-use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision.

### ***Summary***

The concept of reflective practice enjoys considerable positive acclaim in the current extensive literature. There is, however, little empirical evidence available that has explored the value of using reflective practice from the perspective of front-line child care practitioners. This research study aims to address this gap by providing a depth of knowledge and new understanding in relation to identified benefits of using the reflective approach as articulated by practitioners themselves. Using and engaging in reflective practice is an important and indeed essential aspect of child care practice which should permeate and perpetuate all professional interventions with children and families. This introductory chapter has set out an overview of the entire study. An outline of the chapters to follow has also been signposted. The next chapter will present an extensive outline of the literature in relation to reflective practice.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### ***Introduction***

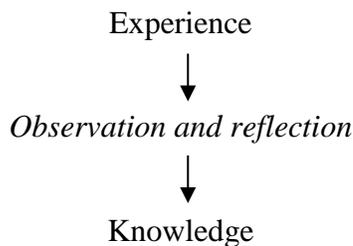
In this chapter I will navigate through the extensive literature on reflective practice. This chapter will chart the origins of the concept, how reflective practice is defined in the literature and how the approach has evolved and developed. The chapter will also set out some of the main reflective models in the literature. The literature available in relation to reflective practice largely depicts the reflective process as a potentially positive and beneficial influence to health, education and professional child care practice. However, other commentators articulate criticisms about the reflective concept due to the absence of empirical research validating the effectiveness and very existence of the reflective concept. In reviewing the literature, links are made between the concepts of reflective practice and critical reflective practice. Indeed, there is some evidence in the literature to suggest that these terms are frequently used interchangeably. There are nonetheless clear differences between these reflective concepts. Further links are made in the literature on the importance of critical reflective practice in the context of social work practice. However, the influence of this approach on day-to-day practice requires further exploration. While there is an extensive volume of descriptive literature available outlining the reflective process, there is considerably less literature on the supportive infrastructure, training and practice skills required to effectively employ the reflective methodology.

### ***2. The origins of reflective practice***

In defining reflective practice, Rolfe et al (2011) assert that “Reflection is a process of thinking, feeling, imagining, and learning by considering what has happened in the past”. Further embedding the reflective concept in learning theory, Moon (2004, p.86) contends that reflection plays a part in ‘good quality learning’ and is an important variable in developing appropriate learning behaviour. In reviewing the literature in relation to the concept of reflective practice it is evident that considerable interest prevails amongst academics and practitioners in relation to understanding the approach and the effectiveness of its application in practice. (Hargraves et al., 2013; Rolfe et al.,

2011; Bolton, 2010; Thompson et al., 2008; Fook et al., 2007; Knott and Scragg; 2007; Dolan et al., 2006; Redmond, 2006; Healy, 2005; Ruch, 2005). However, reflective practice has a long history. It was in the field of education and learning that the early reflective process finds its origins. Dewey (1910) was an educationalist, philosopher, and an influential proponent and pioneer in identifying and developing the reflective approach in the context of education and learning. As noted by Jarvis, (in Redmond, 2006, p.9), Dewey was “..perhaps the most significant of all the writers who have expressed their ideas on the subject of reflective learning ”. As noted by Rolfe et al. (2011, p.34), Dewey regarded knowing and the development of knowledge as an interpersonal and dialectical process whereby the latter developed as a result of social interaction and reflection. The reflective approach identified by Dewey is illustrated in the following model:

**Figure 1: Reflective Approach identified by Dewey**



Dewey advocated the view that learning was a transformatory process through which individuals were encouraged to assess their interpretations of experience and events and reflect upon them to assist in the learning process. As Redmond (2006) notes, Dewey`s view of reflection proposed that it allowed individuals to see through the habitual way the experience of everyday life is interpreted. He further contended that intelligence was not an innate quality but one that could be influenced and developed as individuals responded to experience. He advanced the view that this was achieved through the process of reflective thought and that individuals respond to experience through the process of reflection. In his initial development of the reflective concept, Dewey made direct links between the process of engaging in reflective practice and subsequent

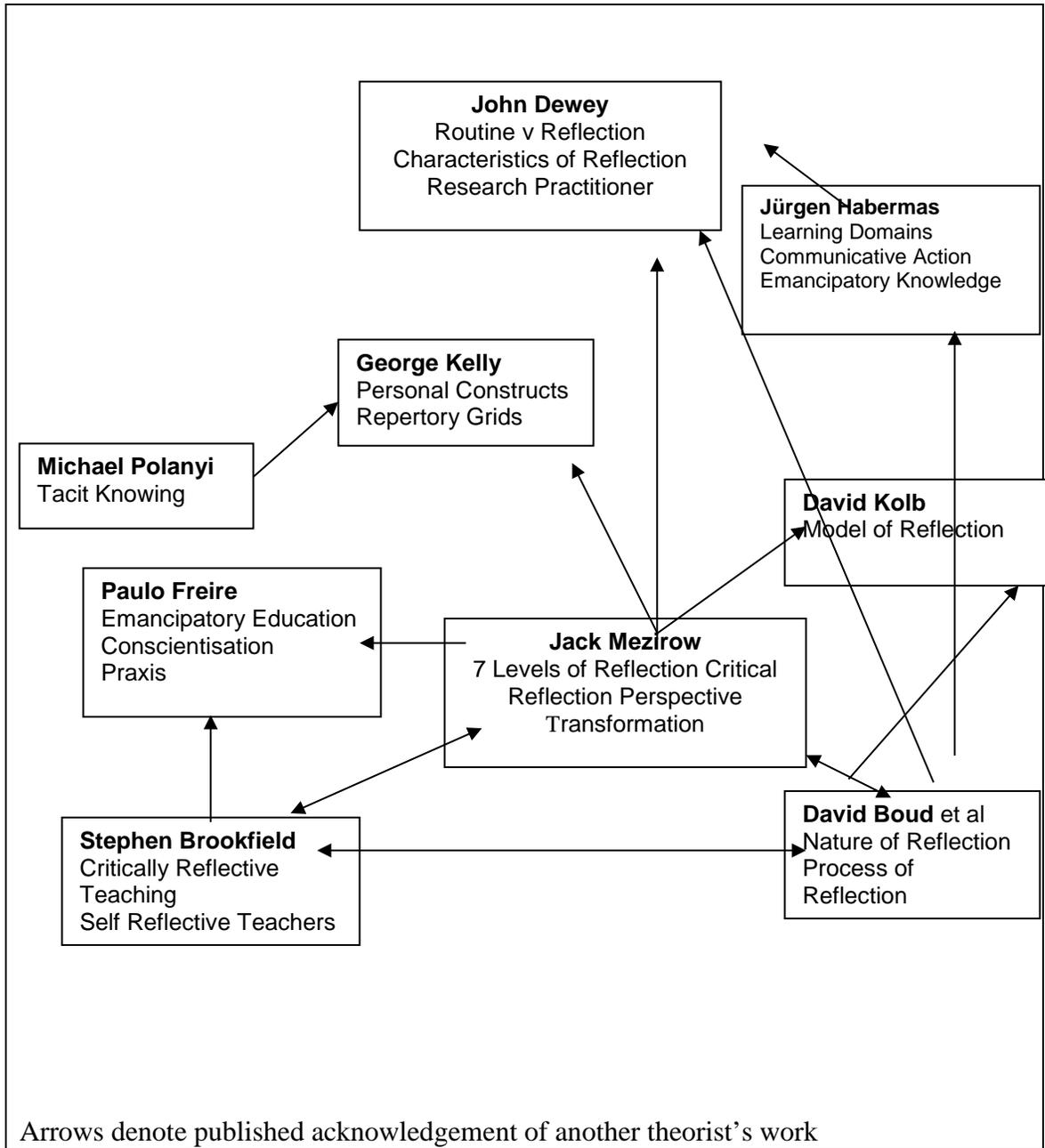
experiential learning. He further made direct links with the process of reflection and learning theory which is the fundamental basis upon which his conceptual approach was based. Other theorists, who subscribed to this early perspective regarding the reflective concept, carried forward and developed further the process becoming influential in their own right. These early reflective pioneers included Argyris, (1957); Freire, (1972); Habermas, (1974); Mezirow, (1981); and Schön, (1983, 1987).

Paulo Freire (1972) focuses on the influence of reflection in education viewing it as an emancipatory and liberating discourse for the downtrodden and powerless, while Habermas (1974) develops a perspective using reflection to illustrate the empowering dimensions and value of the concept to individuals in understanding dominant political and social power. The early work of Habermas is also significant in that he too advanced a perspective linking the reflective process to the development of knowledge. As Redmond (2006) notes, Habermas highlights that professionals have immense power and that the use of reflection and having an awareness of this power differential is valuable for all concerned. It is important to highlight that Freire and Habermas are more aligned to the school of critical reflection. This perspective will be explored in more detail in a subsequent section of the chapter. Cranton (1994) has suggested that there is a durable dimension to the early theoretical contribution of Dewey in that the fundamental ideas inherent in his work in developing a model of reflective learning still have currency today. The development of the reflective process and the chronology of the contributions made are captured in the following diagrams (Figures 2 & 3) adapted from Redmond, (2006, pp.28-29):

**Figure 2: Chronology of Reflection 1910 - 2002**

1910	<b>John Dewey – 1916</b> <i>Democracy and Education</i>	
1930	<b>John Dewey – 1933</b> <i>How We Think</i>	
1950	<b>George Kelly – 1955</b> <i>The Psychology of Personal Constructs</i>	<b>Chris Argyris – 1957</b> <i>Personality and Organisation</i>
1960	<b>Michael Polanyi – 1967</b> <i>The Tacit Dimension</i>	<b>Jürgen Habermas – 1968</b> <i>Knowledge and Human Interest</i>
1970	<b>Paulo Freire – 1972</b> <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i>	<b>Argyris and Schön – 1974</b> <i>Theory in Practice</i>
	<b>Jürgen Habermas – 1974</b> <i>Theory and Practice</i>	<b>David Kolb – 1975</b> <i>Applied Theory of Experiential Learning</i>
1980	<b>Jack Mezirow – 1981</b> <i>A Critical Theory of Learning and Education</i>	<b>Jürgen Habermas – 1981</b> <i>Theory of Communicative Action</i>
	<b>Donald A. Schön – 1983</b> <i>The Reflective Practitioner</i>	
	<b>Boud et al – 1985</b> <i>Reflection – Turning Experience into Learning</i>	
	<b>Donald A. Schön – 1987</b> <i>Educating the Reflective Practitioner</i>	<b>Stephen Brookfield – 1988</b> <i>Developing Critical Thinkers</i>
1990	<b>Mezirow and Associates – 1990</b> <i>Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood</i>	
	<b>Donald A. Schön et al – 1991</b> <i>The Reflective Turn</i>	
	<b>Paulo Freire – 1996</b> <i>Pedagogy of Hope</i>	<b>Jack Mezirow – 1991</b> <i>Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning</i>
	<b>Brookfield and Preskill – 1999</b> <i>Discussion as a Way of Teaching</i>	<b>Stephen Brookfield – 1995</b> <i>Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher</i>

**Figure 3: Inter-relationships and influences of other theorists in the development of reflection**



## ***2.1. The conceptual and theoretical development of reflective practice***

While Dewey is regarded as one of the main founding fathers in the early development of the reflective concept, the contribution of Donald Schön (1983,1987) has also been significant and has received considerable attention within the literature (Hargraves, 2013; Rolfe et al., 2011; Webber et al., 2010; Johns, 2010; Thompson et al., 2008; Fook et al., 2007; Knott et al., 2007; Redmond, 2006; White et al., 2006). Schön, similar to Dewey, recognised links with the use of reflection and the development of knowledge. However, Schön focused on the generation of knowledge and learning emerging from direct practice scenarios. According to Eraut (in Kinsella, 2007) Schön`s seminal work, ‘The Reflective Practitioner’ (1983), is one of the most quoted reference books in the area of professional expertise and reflective practice in recent years. As noted by Redmond (2006), Schön advances an hypothesis contending that there has been an evolving discontent regarding the nature of professionalism and the character of professional practice. Central to Schön`s approach is his seminal contribution in identifying two types of reflection: reflection-on-action, which describes after-the-event-thinking and reflection-in-action, which describes thinking while doing. For Schön (1983, p.68) the former involves “... *the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain and unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understanding which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.*” The latter reflective approach involves: “*When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependant on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case*”. Schön (1983, p.68)

Schön highlights the complex and unpredictable nature of practice scenarios and the need for a flexible reflective response in addressing this practice uncertainty. As noted by Gray et al. (2009), while Schön did not specifically identify social work practice in developing his perspective, his approach is nonetheless explicitly relevant to the social

work task. Redmond (2006) notes that theorists and practitioners in professional social work practice have found that Schön's work offers an important framework for bridging the theory and practice divide. It also shows that Schön's ideas fit well with the philosophical ethos which underpin social work practice, insofar as Schön's theoretical model offers an alternative approach which does not have such an over-reliance on technical-rational solutions alone to addressing and solving complex problems. Instead, Schön promotes the value of practitioner knowledge, intuition, practice wisdom and experience (Schön, 1983, 1987; Kinsella, 2007; Fook et al., 2007; Redmond, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Healy, 2005). Schön highlights the importance of the agency of the practitioner as a pivotal influence in the development of professional knowledge. Through the use of a reflective methodology which involves reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, practitioners generate new learning through their reflective experience, and, as a follow-on consequence, create new knowledge in a bottom-up interaction. This process involves both learning and developing through each experience in what Schön describes as the messy and confusing "swampy lowland" of practice (Schön, 1983, p.42).

In advancing this epistemology of practice, Schön essentially challenges the theoretical and conceptual assumptions underpinning the positivist tradition and empirical practice movement. This specifically relates to the contention inherent in the positivist approach and tradition that only technical-rational solutions, based upon a scientific conceptual framework and linked to evidence-based practice, should guide and inform practice and interventions. The empirical practice movement advocates a structured theoretical approach that attributes little credence to the practice wisdom and accumulated experience of the practitioner. In adapting this approach, practice knowledge develops from a top-down perspective and is linked to evidence based practice underpinned by an empirical theory-base and theoretical and conceptual framework. It should be noted, however, that Schön does not reject or indeed deny the positivist influence of technical and scientific knowledge in helping solve problems. Rather, Schön highlights the conceptual shortcomings of technical rationality, suggesting that the approach is

“incomplete” (Schön, 1983, p.49) and, instead, advances a model advocating the complementary use of both perspectives.

## ***2.2 Defining reflective practice***

The literature pertaining to the use of reflective practice has extended to the fields of social work, nursing and education and many other allied professions (Wilson et al., 2008; Knott et al., 2007; Johns 2010; Jasper, 2003; Brookfield, 1995). In reviewing the literature in relation to reflective practice, it is apparent that the process is applied in different practice settings and has an eclectic definitional meaning amongst practitioners. It is also apparent that definitions applied to the process of reflective practice attribute a particular value to the process, depending on the context in which it is used. As White et al. (2006) observe, defining reflective practice will vary depending on what aspects of the process are being emphasized. Similarly, Fook et al. (2007) note that within different disciplines and intellectual traditions what is understood by ‘reflective practice’ can vary considerably. While there is no single agreed definition of reflective practice in the literature there is nevertheless, a common theme and consensus running through the literature which defines and links the concept of reflective practice to the process of learning. This learning process is achieved through experience and is presented in the literature as a perpetual and ongoing aspect of professional development (Bolton, 2010; Moon, 2004; Share, 2009; Rolfe et al., 2011; Kolb, 1978; Boud et al., 1985; Schön, 2003).

Moon (2004), for example, contends that the process of reflection is directly linked to ‘experiential learning’. Moon asserts that a variety of outcomes can result from this reflective learning process including the following: the development of practice knowledge and understanding, the building of theory from observations, problem-solving and professional development. Boud et al. (1985) express a similar view and consider reflective practice as an activity which enables practitioners to recapture their practice experience, evaluate it, and learn from the encounter. Atkins (1994) has described reflective practice as a complex and deliberate way of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from it, while Bolton (2010) views reflective

practice as an enabling influence to assist practitioners in learning from practice experience. In defining reflective practice, some commentators highlight the heightened professional self-awareness which can result from using the reflective approach. For example, Saleebey (2006) contends that reflective thinking can result in practitioners being more self-aware and more able to critically examine their own deeply held beliefs and attitudes which can potentially impact on their practice and on outcomes for service users. Share et al. (2009) concur with this perspective adding that reflective practice is a means to develop self-aware professionals who possess maturity and insight to learn. Similarly, Johns (2009, p.3) links the use of reflective practice to learning through experience and to achieving what he describes as 'desirable practice as a lived reality' through raised professional self-awareness. According to Johns, this raised professional self-awareness is achieved when practitioners engage in what he refers to as 'deep-seated reflection, which in turn assists practitioners in creating and developing the necessary practice wisdom which subsequently enables them to improve and enhance their practice.

Some commentators have highlighted links between the use of reflective practice and the subsequent connections made with integrating theory to practice. For example, Fook et al. (2007) view reflective practice as an approach to enable practitioners to become more aware of the theory and assumptions inherent in their practice. Bolton (2010) notes that reflective practice involves practitioners paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions. Jasper (2003) considers reflective practice as an essential tool in assisting practitioners to make links between theory and practice and using reflective learning to provide practice knowledge in order to inform practice. Schön (1983) advances the view that the process of reflection itself generates practice knowledge which both informs and develops practice theory. Taylor (2006) aligns with this view contending that practitioner intuition and professional artistry is underpinned by the use of reflective practice to create 'bottom-up' theoretical inductive process.

Advancing a further understanding of the reflective process, Kam-shing Yip (2006) views the process of reflective practice as essentially an individual pursuit of self-reflection during which practitioners evaluate aspects of their practice, including thinking processes, feelings and practitioners' responses to these cognitive states. Hargreaves et al. (2013) contend that applying reflective practice can positively influence how practitioners intervene with service users through using the reflective approach to embed good practice; record thinking processes; develop skills; improve practice and move difficult situations forward. Using this applied meaning of reflective practice, the concept takes on eclectic dimensions and has multiple benefits. Developing further the idea that reflective practice can influence different aspects of practice including the cognitive, emotive learning spheres, Rolfe et al. (2011, p.12) capture this potential diversity in the following definition

*“Reflection is a process of thinking, feeling, imagining and learning by considering what has happened in the past, what might have happened if things had been done differently, what is currently happening, and what could possibly happen in the future.”*

This section has considered how reflective practice is defined in the literature and the various meanings applied to the approach. This section has also illustrated the eclectic nature of the reflective entity and the different interpretations that can inform its use.

## ***2.3 Reflective practice and related conceptual connections***

### ***2.3.1 Reflective practice and relationship-based practice***

In reviewing the various definitions of reflective practice a number of specific connections are made linking reflective practice to other areas of practice. For example Ruch (2005) considers the concept to be integral and directly linked to professional relationship-building. Ruch highlights the essential role of relationship-based practice in the context of developing effective social work interventions and the enhanced potential for resulting better outcomes for service users. Wilson et al. (2008, pp.17-18) further contend that relationship-based practice and reflective practice are inextricably linked and that using reflective practice enables practitioners to employ a more holistic practice incorporating a broader practice perspective that considers four levels of reflection - technical, practical, critical and process.

### ***2.3.2 Reflective practice and assessment process***

The role of reflective practice is also acknowledged within the literature as being a defining component of assessment. Coulshed (2012) notes the importance of reflective practice as being pivotal in the assessment process. Thompson (2008, p.35) acknowledges the role of analytical reflection in assessing and understanding presenting situations. Thompson (2008, p.137) also asserts the importance of the reflective process in avoiding and eradicating what he refers to as ‘routinised practice’. Wilson et al. (2008) further concur with the significant role the reflective process has in the context of undertaking social work assessments. Meanwhile, Munro (2011, p.87) comments on the importance of social workers employing analytical skills whilst undertaking assessment in the area of child protection, adding that these skills of assessment need to be “allied to reflection”. Laming (2009), reinforcing this point, in the context of social work practice, reiterates the importance of employing reflective practice while undertaking assessments. While, according to Wilson (2013, p.12), the practice of reflection is now recognised internationally as key to ensuring social work students are prepared and have “the ability to collect, analyse and interpret relevant information and to use research and enquiry techniques with reflective awareness”. The value of employing reflective practice to address complexity, uncertainty and risk in the context of social work practice is also highlighted by Wilson et al. (2008) and Thompson et al. (2008).

### ***2.3.3 Reflective practice and supervision***

Reflective practice has conceptual links with formal professional supervision (Wonnacott, 2012; Morrison, 2005; Kolb, 1998; Pritchard, 1995; Ghaye et al., 2000). According to Morrison (2005, p.137), commenting on the use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision, “*Engaging in experience is not sufficient either. Without reflection on the experience it may be lost or misunderstood*”. Kolb (1998) has developed a reflective model that is widely used in the context of formal supervision which enables practitioners to be reflective and explore feelings, patterns of behaviour

and to make connections arising from the experience as a method of experiential learning. Ghaye et al. (2000), commenting on how reflective practice can enhance nursing practice, suggest that reflective practice could be employed to discover what knowledge, skills and attitudes nurses employ. Pritchard (1995) makes the observation that engaging in the process of reflective supervision can produce reflective practice. Wonnacott (2012), commenting on the role of reflective practice in the context of social work supervision, suggests that it is helpful to use the four levels of reflection as developed by Ruch (2007) as a framework to address practice issues. The role of reflection in the context of formal supervision has also been acknowledged by Munro (2011) in her review of social work practice.

#### ***2.3.4 Reflective practice and action research***

Bearing in mind the methodological approach used in this research study, McIntosh (2010) draws parallels and makes a linkage between the process of action research and reflective practice. Referring to the work of Elliott (1991), McIntosh asserts that the nature of action research is to be reflective and that the methodological approach of action research is fundamentally about the transformation of practice achieved through the use of reflection. In linking the use of action research to reflective practice, McIntosh (2010, p.34) further observes that the process integrates data assimilation, reflection and the improvement of practice: *“It is an empirical approach to the importance of data in reflectively improving practice”*. McIntosh further notes how using reflective practice can create an enhanced depth of knowledge and understanding. In defining reflective practice, McIntosh considers the ten principles developed by Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) as capturing the authentic meaning of the reflective methodology. Coghlan et al. (2010, p.48) contend that: *“Reflective practice may be viewed as a specific dimension of action research”*. Reason and Bradbury (2009, p.1), further acknowledging the inherent process of reflection as being essentially a technical aspect of the action research methodology, state that: *“It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people”*. In conclusion, this section has considered the definitive links made in the literature between the use of action research and reflective

practice. As a methodological process it can be argued that action research is an inherently reflective process.

### ***2.3.5 Reflective practice and reflexivity***

The concept of reflexivity is considered in the literature as part of the reflective tradition but with a quite distinct function. As already noted by Fook et al. (2007), the descriptions of the term reflexivity are frequently used interchangeably with critical reflective practice. As White et al. (2006) further observe, reflexivity is portrayed within the literature as an elusive and “slippery” term used in different ways and different settings. However, in the context of considering critical reflection, the concept of reflexivity has a significance which necessitates further scrutiny. Reflexivity is conceptually utilised largely in the area of interpretive social research. (Rolfe et al., 2011; Thompson et al., date ; Gray et al., 2009 , 2008; Fook et al., 2007; White et al., 2006). However, as Ferguson (in D`Cruz, 2007) also points out, reflexivity is also about critically reflecting on our actions and self-identity. According to White et al. (2006, p.74), the concept of reflexivity essentially challenges the positivist contention of a researcher being “...*distanced, disinterested and an unemotional observer of object (s) of study, capable of avoiding bias, error and distortion by adhering to standardised , objective methods of data collection*”. Fook et al. (2007, p.27) contend that, in undertaking social science research, “...*it was especially important to recognise the influence of self on research...*”. Fook et al. (2007) further contend that reflexivity emphasizes the ability to look both inward and outward and to recognise the connection with social, cultural and ideological understandings. Reflexivity also has the potential to reshape and influence personal development through self-awareness and critical self-scrutiny. The concept of reflexivity gives recognition to the individual influence each actor brings to the research setting and ultimately to the development and creation of knowledge. The concept of reflexivity incorporates a recognition regarding the influence that our social and cultural settings bring to the process of knowledge development (White et al., 2006). The concept of reflexivity is therefore important in the context of critical reflection in that the term promotes the idea of our individual ability to recognise that all aspects of ourselves and the context in which we live can act as variables in

influencing the way we reason and view the world. As Fook et al. (2007) suggest, reflexivity is one way of being critically reflective.

## ***2.4 Models of reflective practice***

Over the past twenty years there has been a marked increase in the development of models of reflective practice. These models set out step-by-step methodologies to assist the practitioner in achieving the optimum in using the reflective process. Models of reflection can range from being complex through to those that require the practitioner to follow straightforward sequential reflective actions or a series of cyclical reflective steps. Supporting the use of reflective models and the advantages of employing a structured approach, Platzer et al. (1997) have identified that learning through reflection is more potent if there is an awareness and understanding of frameworks that encourage a structured process to guide the act of reflection. There is evidence in the literature of an interconnectedness and a degree of circularity in relation to the development of reflective models. For example, many of the reflective models use the reflective process to extract learning from experience. This approach links back to the early work of Dewey (1910,1933) and the more current contribution of Schön (1983,1987). Similarly, as noted by Redmond (2006), Boud et al. (1985) adopted and redeveloped the reflective model advanced by Kolb to incorporate the complexities inherent in using the reflective process (e.g. emotions, complexity and purposefulness). Johns (2009) acknowledges the influence and contribution of other reflective theorists in developing his reflective approach including: Schön, (1987); Boud, (1985); Gibbs, (1988); and Mizerow (1981). Some of the models are commonly utilised within particular practice settings such as nursing, occupational therapy or teaching. However, this is not a fixed predisposition as cross-over between models and practice domains was also evident in the literature.

One of the early and, indeed, most enduring and influential models of reflective practice was advanced by Donald Schön (1983). However, a caveat should be introduced when describing this particular approach as it is not presented by Schön as a working model but more appropriately represents a reflective process. He based his approach largely on the work of Dewey's idea of reflective thinking. He also placed significant importance

upon practitioner knowledge, experience and intuition in the development of practice solutions and in the creation of new knowledge. The approach developed by Schön (1983, p.49) is illustrated in Figure 4 below and was designed to assist practitioners when they faced practice situations “of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict”.

**Figure 4: Schön’s Concept of Reflective Practice**

(Source: B. Teekman, Journal of advanced Nursing 2000, 31 (5), 1125-113)

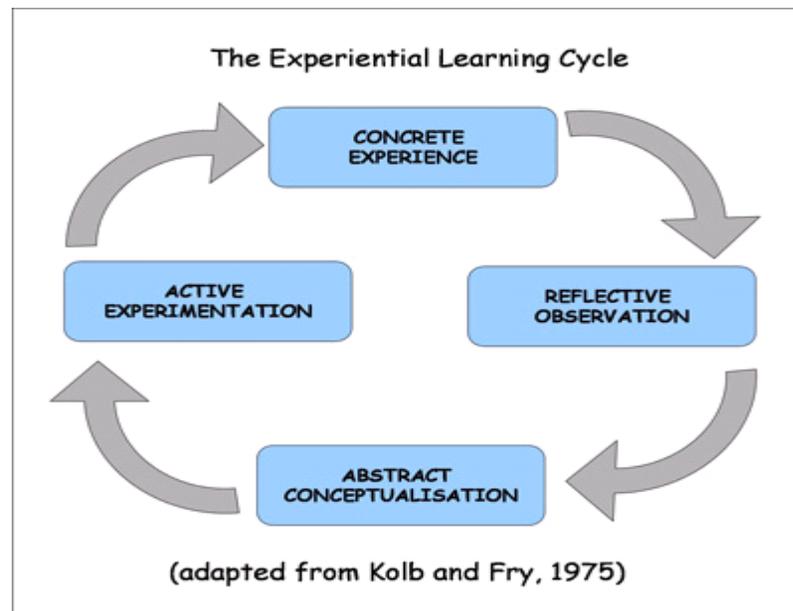
Reflection-in-action:- Refers to the reflective thinking one is doing while one is doing the action.

Reflection-on-action:- Occurs, in contrast to reflection-in-action, after the experience has taken place.

Schön’s model of reflective practice has been very significant in the subsequent development of the concept and is referred to widely within the literature across all practice domains. Following on from the work of Schön, but advancing a model of reflection based on experiential learning, is the work of David Kolb (1984). The Kolb model of reflective practice has also been influential and enjoys significant reference within the literature across most practice domains. Kolb advances a model of reflective practice which incorporates a four-stage experiential cycle. “Thus learning is seen as the creation of knowledge through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.41). Kolb asserts that by analysing the experience, the reflective process generates theoretical knowledge and can be applied to future practice scenarios. The Kolb model is widely utilised in the context of supervision of professional staff particularly social work and social care Morrison (2005). Kolb also highlights the importance of recognising that individuals have different learning styles and that this is a factor while engaging in effective reflective practice. It might be suggested however that this model, by its cyclical design, may be of less use and indeed problematic whilst dealing with an unfolding practice crisis. In addition, Kolb places less emphasis on practitioner

experience in the generation of knowledge as opposed to others, for example, Schön. As outlined earlier the Kolb model also negates the importance of the reflective process itself in relation to levels of complexity and role of emotions in the reflective process. The four fundamental stages of the Kolb model are illustrated in the following diagram.

**Figure 5: Kolb's model of reflective practice**



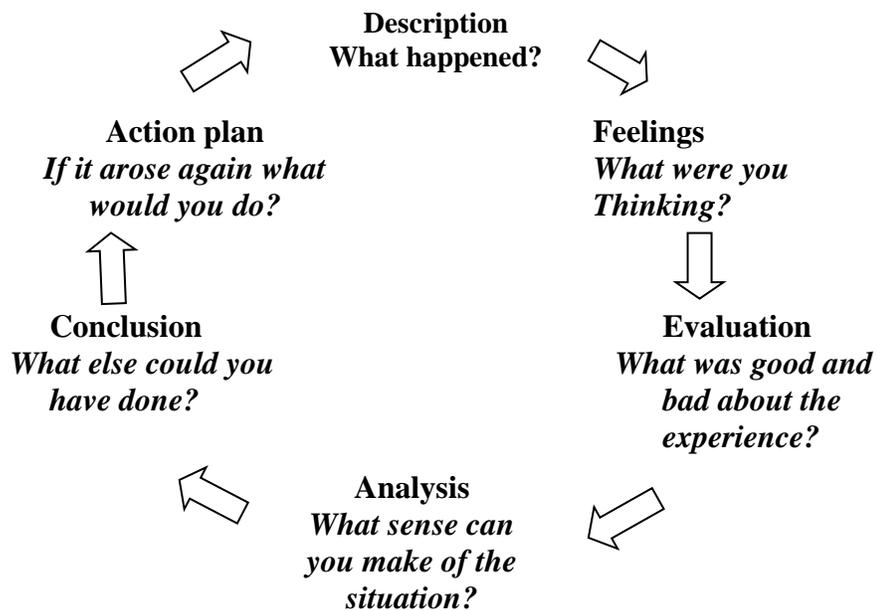
Boud et al. (1985), advance a more comprehensive and modified version of the Kolb approach. The model endeavours to delve deeper into the components of reflection itself. Reflecting upon experience, the model has three essential stages and draws heavily on the realm of feelings. This model has been extensively utilised in the field of nursing. Boud et al. (1985, p.19) assert that reflection is an activity in which people "Recapture their experience, think about it, mull over it and evaluate it". The three main stages in this model include:

- Returning to the experience

- Attending to feelings
- Re-evaluating the experience

The Gibbs model (1988), presents a reflective cycle that incorporates six stages. This model is similar to that of Boud et al. (1985). However, Gibbs develops further the action planning stage. The Gibbs model offers a framework that includes a clear description of the situation, analysis of feelings, evaluation of experience, analysis to make sense and learn from the experience and a dimension that enables the practitioner to consider other options. The final stage of the Gibbs model is reflection upon the experience itself. This model is utilised in the areas of education and nursing and may be particularly useful to complement journal writing as part of the reflective process.

**Figure 6: Gibbs model of reflective practice**



Another of the predominant models of reflective practice within the literature is that advanced by Johns (1994). This early model developed by Johns has been frequently re-designed and is perhaps one of the more rigid models reviewed. The working model consists of a series of pre-constructed questions that are asked. One core question is then

followed by five cue questions that are designed to guide analysis whilst reflecting on an incident or practice experience. Johns uses a series of cue questions to assist the practitioner access, make sense of, and learn from each experience. This model of structured reflection was advanced by Johns as a guide for analysis while reflecting on critical incidents or while engaging in general reflection on experience. Johns recommends that his reflective model is used in the context of a structured learning environment such as formal supervision.

**Figure 7: Johns model of reflective practice**

**Core question – What information do I need to access in order to learn through this experience?**

**Cue questions**

**1. Description of the experience**

- Phenomenon – describe the here and now experience
- Causal – what essential factors contributed to this experience?
- Context – what are the significant background factors to this experience?
- Clarifying – what are the key processes (for reflection) in this experience?

**2. Reflection**

- What was I trying to achieve?
- Why did I intervene as I did?
- What were the consequences of my actions for:
  - Myself?
  - The patient/family?
  - The people I work with?
- How did I feel about this experience when it was happening?
- How did the patient feel about it?
- How do I know how the patient felt about it?

**3. Influencing factors**

- What internal factors influenced my decision-making?
- What external factors influenced my decision-making?
- What sources of knowledge did/should have influenced my decision-making?

**4. Could I have dealt with the situation better?**

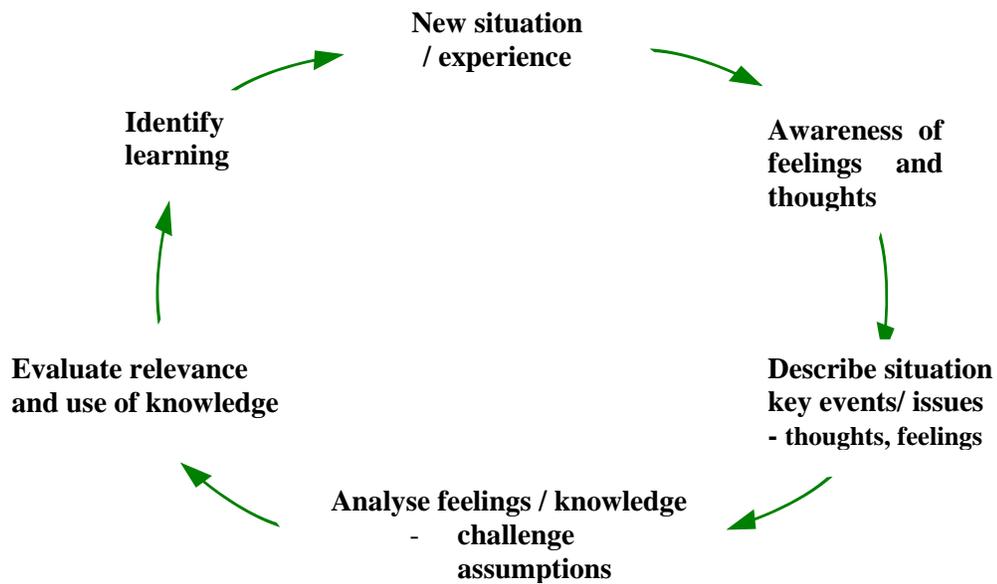
- What other choices did I have?
- What would be the consequences of these choices?

**5. Learning**

- How do I feel now about this experience?
- How have I made sense of this experience in light of past experiences and future practice?
- How has this experience changed my ways of knowing:
  - Empirics?
  - Aesthetics?
  - Ethics?
  - Personal?

Atkins and Murphy (1994) also developed a stages model of reflection. This model places an emphasis on emotional feelings and the emotional impact arising from situations for practitioners. The first stage of this model necessitates that the practitioner is aware of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. The next stage incorporates an analysis of feelings and knowledge. The concluding stage leads into reflective learning emerging from the event. The authors endeavour to unravel the complexities of the concept whilst equally trying to identify the key skills required to engage in reflection. Atkins and Murphy found many similarities within the literature regarding descriptions of the reflective process and went on to suggest that many of the apparent differences within the process of reflection are terminological (Atkins and Murphy,1993).

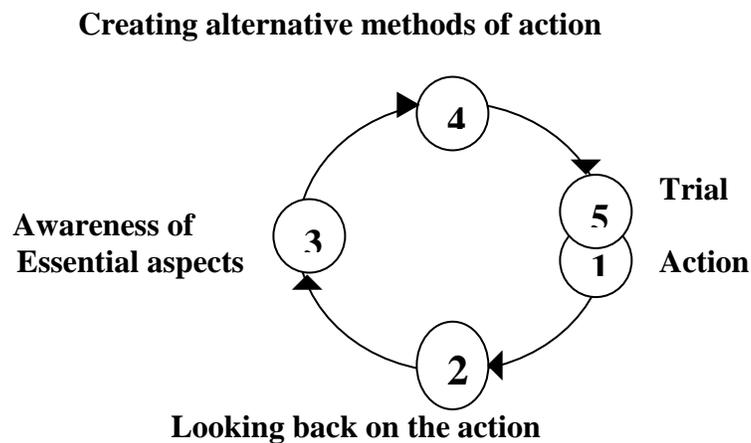
**Figure 7: The Atkins and Murphy model of reflective practice**



Used essentially in the sphere of education, the **ALACT** model (1999) was developed by Korthagen. The abbreviation means: **A**ction - **L**ooking back at the action - **A**wareness of the essential aspects - **C**reating alternative methods of action - **T**rail of alternative method. It is suggested that the ALACT model was designed to provide a

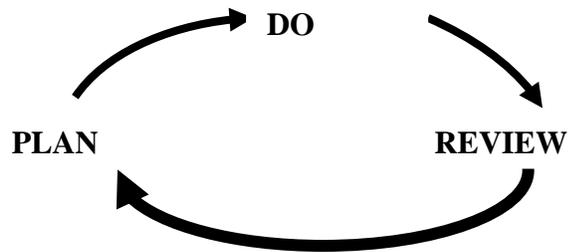
systematic approach whilst using the reflective process within the domain of education. Reflection is considered to be a way to gain insight into teacher development and the nature of the relationship between teacher cognition and teacher behaviour (Korthagen and Kessels, 1999).

**Figure 8: The ALACT model of reflective practice**

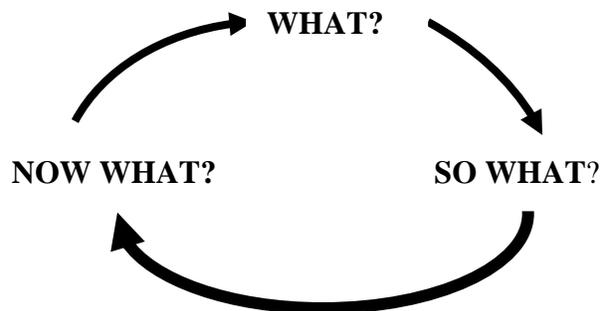


In terms of design, and perhaps simplicity, Greenaway (1995) advances a three stage model designed to assist practitioners learn from experience (see Figure 10). This experiential model is yet another example of a reflective cycle. Advancing a similar reflective three-stage model, Rolfe et al. (2001) put forward a framework taken from Borton's (1970) developmental model. This model is based essentially on Kolb's (1984) cycle of action and reflection (see Figure 11). The model is informed by a number of prompts that focus on returning to the situation, understanding the context and modifying future outcomes.

**Figure 9: The Greenaway model of reflective practice**



**Figure 10: The Rolfe et al. model of reflective practice**



Ruch (2007) advances a reflective model based on what she refers to in the literature as modes of reflection. This approach is different inasmuch as it provides a breakdown of the reflective process into comprehensible parts which are applicable to particular areas of reflection. The four identified modes include:

- **Technical Reflection**

Technical reflection is related to technical rationality and the empirical analytic level of knowing (Habermas, 1973; van Manen, 1977). Hatton and Smith (1995, p.45) describe technical reflection as ‘decision making about immediate behaviours or skills’ and it is generally associated with instrumental reflection as a means of problem solving (Clift et al., 1990; Kondrat, 1992). Technical reflection uses

‘external/technical’ sources of knowledge derived from formal theory and research to examine essential skills in order to resolve an identified problem.

- **Practical Reflection**

Practical reflection, most commonly associated with the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987) inverts the established epistemological framework by suggesting that rather than knowledge acquisition being solely ‘top-down’, i.e. formal theoretical learning imposed from outside of the practice situation, it is also, and as importantly, ‘bottom-up’, i.e. gained from specific practice experiences.

- **Critical Reflection**

Critical reflection is associated with Habermas’s (1973) critical and emancipatory sources of knowledge and seeks to transform practice by challenging the existing social, political and cultural conditions which promote certain ‘constitutive interests’ at the expense of others and the structural forces that distort or constrain professional practice (Clift et al., 1990).

- **Process Reflection**

A fourth mode of reflection - process reflection - draws on psycho-dynamic theory. Process reflection focuses on the unconscious as well as the conscious aspects of practice, recognises the mirroring processes that can operate in practice and emphasizes the unavoidable impact on practitioners of the emotional content of interactions (Ash, 1992, 1995; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997). Familiarity with the fundamental psycho-dynamic concepts - transference, counter-transference, projective identification and mirroring - enables practitioners to reflect on the complex web of dynamics in which they are embroiled - with clients, with supervisors, with teams, with agencies - and to contextualise the behaviours of individuals and organisations.

## ***2.5 Critical Theory***

A fundamental feature which differentiates and separates critical reflection practice from reflective practice is the inclusion of critical theory in the former as an underlying philosophical orientation. As White et al. (2006) observe, the critical component of reflection is provided by critical theory. In addition, as Fook et al. (2007) suggest, the importance of critical social theory resides in the approach providing a broader framework for understanding what it is that critical reflection should help achieve. Adapting a similar approach, Ferguson (2003) proposes that critical theory can be utilised as an interpretative framework. The inclusion of critical theory as a fundamental facet of critical reflective practice is significant in the context of the terms of reference and analysis which results from utilising the approach. For example, as Fook et al. (2007) suggest, the starting point for critical theory is the recognition that domination within society is both personally experienced and structurally created. It is further suggested that individuals can participate in their own domination by virtue of them retaining self-defeatist beliefs about their place in society. According to Brookfield (1995), the use of a critical theory perspective offers a more thorough-going form of reflection. Reinforcing this analysis and highlighting the distinctive nature of incorporating a critical theory orientation, White et al. (2006, p.9) summarize the essential thrust of what constitutes critical theory and distinguishes it from reflection: “*...critical theory involves social and political analysis which enable transformative change, whereas reflection may remain at the level of undisruptive in techniques or superficial thinking.*”

Agger (2006, p.4), in advancing a definition of critical theory, highlights the broader social dimensions and ‘theory cluster’ of the critical theory tradition which incorporates opposition to positivism, highlights that what is termed social domination is structural in origin and requires change through the adaptation of a critical theory approach beginning at the level of the individual. A more thorough expedition pertaining to the origins of the critical theory tradition will be considered in Chapter Three which

addresses the research methodology and questions of paradigms and the critical philosophy that underpins this research study.

## ***2.6 Critical reflective practice***

### ***2.6.1 Origins***

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that some conceptual blurring prevails and the terms reflective practice, critical reflective practice and reflexivity are used interchangeably (Fook and Gardner, 2007; De Cruz et al., 2007; Knott and Scragg, 2007; White et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2000). These terms are utilised to describe similar yet inherently different conceptual entities. In the interests of clarity, it is important to demarcate these terms and ascertain the discernible differences that exist between them, while also clarifying their meaning, significance and the interpretations that accompany their use in practice. Before embarking upon a more in-depth exploration of these terms and associated concepts in the context of this literature review, it is worth reflecting on the historical origins of critical reflection and how this concept and process developed. As noted by Fook et al. (2007), the evolution of the critical reflective perspective and the subsequent development of critical reflective practice as a conceptual and theoretical discourse, is a complex and sometimes confusing subject within the literature spanning across different fields of practice and disciplines.

As White et al. (2006) observe, early references to critical reflection can be traced as far back as Socrates who stressed the centrality of critical self-examination, or living the examined life. Pioneer advocates of the reflective process such as Dewey (1933) further engendered interest in the concept and were influential in the subsequent development and evolution of the reflective process and, to some extent, with the emerging notion of critical reflection. A number individuals made a significant contribution to the ongoing development of critical theory. In particular, the work of Paulo Freire (1972); Jürgen Habermas (1971); Mezirow, (1981,1991); Schön, (1983); and, more latterly, Stephen Brookfield (1995) were central. The development of a critically reflective perspective moved beyond the type of retrospective thinking pioneered by Dewey. A fundamental starting point and a common denominator in relation to all the early proponents of

critical reflection was their shared collective interest in education and the educative process as the fundamental starting point to engender and ignite individual consciousness and awareness (Freire, 1972; Habermas, 1973; Mizerow, 1991; Schön, 1983). It should be highlighted that the early proponents of critical reflection contemplated and indeed advocated a much deeper and more far reaching examination of social, political, cultural and ideological variables which impact on individuals within society. Proponents of the critical reflective tradition advance the worldview that if a more critical analysis of society was adopted both individually and collectively within society, then adopting this approach had the potential to liberate society and initiate a broader desire for transformation and change towards a more just and egalitarian society. For the early pioneers of critical reflection this awareness raising represented the building blocks for subsequent enlightenment, resulting in the further development of effective individual critical reflection (Freire, 1972, p.109). Freire also envisaged that the educative process had the empowering potential to liberate and emancipate through what he described as conscientization. This process would be a catalyst for individual change and social transformation. Freire asserts that critical reflection would allow the individual to appraise, recreate and improve his own reality (Redmond, 2006, p.18).

In advocating the utilisation of a critically reflective paradigm, Jürgen Habermas (1971, 1973) highlights how unjust dominant ideologies permeate and negatively influence society and perpetuate an unjust and negative social culture, ideology, perceived norms and social structures (Redmond, 2006; Brookfield, 1995). Habermas in his seminal work on critical reflection emphasizes the importance of knowledge acquisition as a central facet associated with the emancipatory process. Commenting on the use of critical self-reflection in the context of social work practice, Kam-shing Yip (2006, p.777) notes that the meaning of reflective practice as promoted by Habermas entails a process of critical self-determination: *“It is a process of becoming aware of the influence of societal and ideological assumptions, especially ethical and moral beliefs behind professional practice”*. As noted by Redmond (2006), Habermas went on to develop a three stage learning process which he categorizes into three separate domains: the technical learning domain, the practical learning domain, and, thirdly, the emancipatory learning domain.

Habermas equates the utilization of a questioning and challenging critical reflective process as a method to acquire knowledge and as a process to empower individuals and society to regain control, to have a better understanding of social justice and, ultimately, as a process that would lead to both individual and collective freedom. Habermas (1983) subsequently developed a seminal perspective relating to the process of communication. In his theory of 'Communicative Action' Habermas incorporates the principles and ethos of equality, and inclusion that underpin the critical theoretical orientation. Developing further the philosophy of critical reflection, Mezirow (1991) also made a significant contribution to the understanding and promotion of critical reflection within the literature. As noted by Redmond (2006), Mezirow was greatly influenced by both Freire and Habermas in the development of his work. The central thrust to Mezirow's perspective is that individuals needed to critically question and challenge the existing and prevailing psycho-cultural, social structure and assumptions that influence individual frames of reference, which subsequently guide, inform and constrain how we view ourselves and others within society (Redmond, 2006). Mezirow developed a reflective model which incorporates seven levels of reflectivity. He links individual emancipation and the development of raised consciousness and awareness to the utilisation of a critically reflective conceptual framework. Mezirow (1991) believes raised consciousness can result in a desire for positive transformative change.

### ***2.6.2 Defining critical reflective practice***

It is difficult, within the existing body of literature, to identify an agreed definition of the term critical reflective practice. There are instead a number of common themes which appear to unify the conceptual framework of critical reflection. Reference has previously been made to the early pioneers and advocates of critical reflection whose work and contribution incorporate common themes that essentially define the concept. Freire (1972), for example, considers critical reflection as essential to emancipation and liberation. Habermas (1971) shares this perspective and asserts that freedom becomes possible because emancipatory knowledge embraces critical reflection. Mezirow (1991) further considers critical reflection as precursor to transformative learning which may, he contends, lead to changes in personal understanding and, potentially, behaviour. This

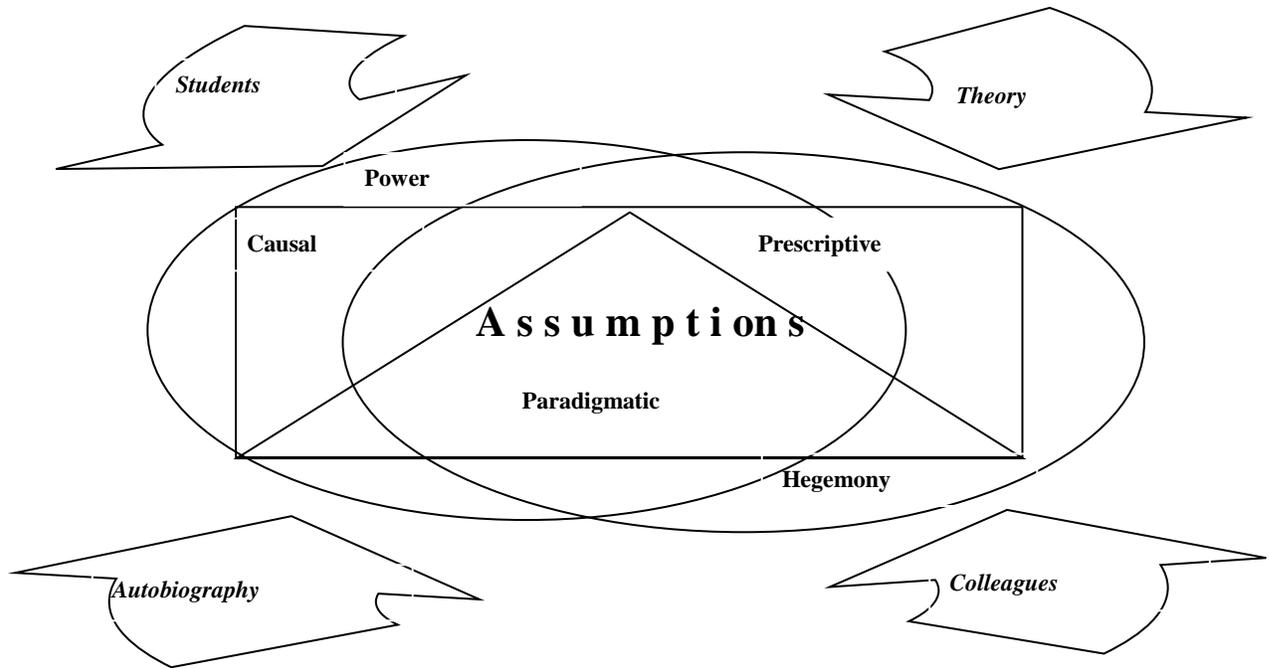
latter viewpoint is also supported by Brookfield (1995). A fundamental characteristic inherent in the critical reflective perspective is the role of the reflective process in questioning deep-seated assumptions (Thompson et al., 2008; Fook et al., 2007; White et al., 2006; Adams et al., 2002; Pease et al., 1999; Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection is utilised to challenge and question assumptions about society and social relationships and how our individual thinking evolves into perceptions about the social order. As noted by Brookfield (1995), the most distinctive aspect of the critical reflective process is the ‘hunting’ of assumptions. Brookfield further asserts that “...*a critical rationale grounds our decisions in core beliefs, values, and assumptions*” (Brookfield, 1995, p.23). The idea of questioning assumptions is a recurring theme emerging within the literature in terms of defining critical reflection, both in the context of the early pioneers of the concept, and also in relation to more modern perspectives.

A predominant feature in characterising and defining critical reflection within the literature is the focus on questioning and challenging power and power relations within society (De Cruz et al., 2007; White et al., 2006; Redmond, 2006,). As Fook et al. (2007) observe, it is the focus on power which makes reflection critical. Similarly, Brookfield (1995, p.8) also asserts that “...*reflection becomes critical when it questions power*”. It is also suggested in some of the literature that the adaptation of a postmodern conceptual framework utilised in the context of critical reflective practice has the potential to bring a new perspective and enlightenment. This relates specifically to existing perceptions of power and power relations, knowledge development, and how language is utilised within society to reinforce and sustain social and structural relationships (Fook et al., 2007; Morley, 2006; Hugman, 2003; Pease, 2002).

An additional underlying theme permeating the approach is the emphasis on using the process to bring about transformation and change. This theme of effecting change is a defining characteristic of the approach. For example, as noted by Adams et al. (2002, p.87), “*Reflectiveness is a stage on the way to criticality. It is not sufficient to be reflective. We need to use understanding that we gain from reflection to achieve change*”. Brookfield (1995) further asserts that engaging in reflection is not enough and

that the reflective process must be linked to bringing about change. In considering the areas of change that are linked to the adaptation of a critically reflective approach, Thompson et al. (2008, p.29) assert “*Rather, we mean it in the sense of an approach that is characterised by questioning and not taking things for granted, especially social arrangements that are based on inequality and disadvantage.*” Brookfield (1995) captures the essence of critical reflective practice by asserting the process is inherently ideological and grounded in a moral set of values and beliefs which promote justice, fairness and compassion. Brookfield further advanced the view that becoming critically reflective involved a process of learning and change. Focusing specifically on the area of education and teaching, Brookfield identified four lenses through which teachers and practitioners, by way of a professional aid, can critically review their practice and, in so doing, address issues pertaining to professional awareness, power and checking assumptions: “*When we embark on this journey, we have available four lenses through which we can view our teaching...they are (1) our autobiographies as teachers and learners, (2) our students eyes, (3) our colleagues experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. Viewing what we do through these different lenses alerts us to distorted or incomplete aspects of our assumptions that need to be investigated*”. The following diagram illustrates this interlinked process.

**Figure 11: Critical reflective process**  
 (developed by L Peterman in Brookfield, 1995, p.30)



## ***2.7 Critique of reflective practice***

Despite the extensive literature available in relation to the concept of reflective practice across different professional disciplines, White et al. (2006) note that relatively little empirical research has been undertaken regarding the use and effectiveness of the reflective approach. The absence of empirical research in relation to the area of reflective practice is a relevant issue for two main reasons. Firstly, validating the effectiveness of the reflective approach is problematic without empirical evidence. Secondly, the absence of empirical research regarding the concept of reflective practice creates a gap in relation to levels of knowledge and understanding about the practical use and benefits of using the approach. Addressing the first of these points, Ixer (1999) has questioned the existence of the reflective concept. Ixer (1999) asserts that the literature on reflective practice is confusing and contradictory. He further comments that the idea of reflective practice is widely misunderstood and that there is no clear agreement on what it really is or if it actually works. In addition, Ixer critiques Schön's

ideas of reflective practice as lacking in practical application to social work. Ixer contends that until clear empirical evidence emerges validating the concept of reflective practice, questions about the very existence of the approach will prevail.

Fook et al. (2007) further observe that gaps in the research on reflective practice has in itself been a major drawback in the initiation of further research in the area. Ruch (2007) contends that while attention has been paid to the process of reflective practice in terms of defining and understanding the concept, considerably less attention has been paid in the literature to evaluating the conditions that facilitate its development. According to Wilson (2013, p.154), commenting on the perceived role of reflective practice in social work education: “... *there has been little systemic empirical examination of its utility in facilitating empirical professional development*”. Wilson further contends that the operational aspects of the reflective approach are under-researched. Making a similar observation, Hargreaves et al. (2013, p.162), while acknowledging the reported benefits that result from the use of reflective practice, also highlight the limited research basis upon which the concept of reflective practice is based. They further assert that there has yet to be robust research evidence to confirm reported benefits that accrue from the use of reflective practice.

The absence of empirical research pertaining to the use of reflective practice, and its effectiveness has been further illustrated by other commentators. Kim-shing Yip (2006) advances a note of caution in relation to the use of self-reflective practice asserting that if particular inappropriate conditions prevail, the use of self-reflective practice could be a potentially harmful and damaging process. Kim-shing Yip draws attention to the existence of inappropriate conditions to engage in self-reflection which might include a demanding and unsupportive work environment, practitioners having an unresolved past trauma, apathetic colleagues, and having a negative self-image. These examples, it can be argued, reinforce the apparent gaps in understanding amongst professionals in relation to the use of reflective practice and, as noted by Ruch (2007, p.662), “... *there is a paucity of empirical evidence relating to social work practitioners’ understanding and experience of reflective practice and the conditions that facilitate or inhibit its use.*”

Separately, Gardner, (in Dolan et al., 2006, p.104), further highlights the complexities and risks pertaining to the use of reflective practice and how practitioners, who do not fully understand the reflective approach, could potentially collude with themselves if the process is not used appropriately particularly when reflecting on errors in practice or when reflecting on mistakes made.

## ***2.8 Interpreting the literature in relation to reflective practice***

There is a considerable volume of existing literature regarding the concept of reflective practice. This extensive literature regarding the use of reflective practice spans across a diverse range of allied professions. The concept of reflective practice is defined in the literature as a process that offers multiple benefits. These benefits include professional knowledge development, heightened professional self-awareness, skill enhancement, improved practice and other practice improvements gained through reflective experiential learning. Furthermore, links are made in the literature regarding the practice value of using reflective practice while undertaking casework assessments. Reflective practice is linked also in the literature as being a pivotal factor in supporting practitioners to develop effective relationship-based practice.

There is a prevailing consensus inherent in the literature and a compelling descriptive case presented that the reflective process is a positive entity that can enhance practice. However, as already outlined a number of commentators have highlighted that the concept of reflective practice is essentially under-researched (White et al., 2007, p.19). Indeed, the absence of empirical research validating the reflective process has for some commentators called into question the very existence of the approach (Iyer, 1999). The lack of empirical research in relation to the use and value of the reflective practice also raises other questions about the reflective process that are not addressed in the existing literature. Some of these questions relate, for example, to the required training needed to equip practitioners to be reflective. The process of engaging in reflective practice may require the development of specific skills and an awareness of adopting a reflexive approach. This aspect of understanding the reflective process is lacking in the current literature. There are further gaps regarding the reflective process in relation to the

optimum conditions required to promote and support the use of reflective practice in the field. Similarly, there is little available empirical literature regarding the impediments that inhibit or restrict the use of reflective practice. In using the reflective approach there would also appear to be a lack of attention in the existing literature regarding how the use of reflective practice is recorded. Moreover, there is a lack of attention in the existing literature regarding how, from a supervisory perspective, the use of reflective practice is managed and checked.

Undertaking this research study presents an opportunity to address these deficits in knowledge. This study will incorporate a research design that will explore the use of reflective practice, through the use of the Johns model, in the context of both a structured and unstructured practice setting. This research design will further enable insights to be gained into the precise benefits that result from the use of the reflective approach while also providing new knowledge into the mechanics of its use. This research study will, in addition, add to the existing body of practice knowledge by addressing the identified gaps in the empirical research and through obtaining the perspective of practitioners who use the reflective process.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter I have reviewed the extensive literature that exists in relation to the theoretical and conceptual entity of reflective practice. There is a consensus apparent within the literature, particularly in how reflective practice is defined, that employing the approach is a 'good thing' and can enhance professional practice. Many perceived benefits are cited in the literature as being attributed to the use of reflective practice: experiential learning, improved practice, knowledge development, raised professional awareness are just some of these reported benefits. There is, however, a valid criticism articulated in the literature that questions the value of reflective practice. This criticism is based on the contention that little empirical evidence exists to substantiate the effectiveness of using the reflective approach. The absence of empirical evidence validating the perceived benefits of using the reflective methodology challenges the credibility of the concept. In addition, gaps in the area of empirical research on

reflective practice raise further questions about the levels of conceptual understanding that currently prevail. Undertaking this literature review has exemplified that multiple models of reflective practice exist and the different methods and contexts in which the reflective process is used. The literature in this regard is predominantly descriptive outlining process. However, there is little reference within the existing literature regarding the types of structure or skills needed to engage in the reflective process. There are links made in the literature between reflective practice and critical reflective practice. The fundamental difference between the two perspectives relates to the latter being informed by critical theory. The merits of using critical reflective practice are promoted in the context of health and social care as being important in terms of raising awareness around issues related to anti-oppressive practice, social injustice, inequality, discrimination and unequal power differential that prevail in society. The use of critical reflective practice will be explored in this study.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### ***Introduction***

In this chapter I will describe the methodology utilised to address the overarching research questions and objectives of this exploratory research study. The chapter is divided into a number of sections, each of which will deal with a specific aspect of the study. To begin the chapter I will briefly review the rationale, research questions and objectives of the study. I will then address questions of paradigm. In this section, I will endeavour to set out the philosophical orientation of critical theory which underpins the study. I will then describe the various qualitative research methods used in the study and the research design employed. Following this, I will address the area of data analysis and the methods employed to analyse the data collected in the course of the study. I will also address the ethical considerations in relation to this research study and the measures taken by me to deal with ethical issues. Finally, I will set out the limitations of the study and conclude the chapter with a closing summary.

### ***3. Study rationale, research questions and objectives***

In undertaking this empirical research study, I hope to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding the theoretical concept of reflective practice. As illustrated in Chapter Two, there is a gap in the existing literature pertaining to available empirical research that validates the reflective concept as practice entity, and the value of using the approach in the context of social care practice. It is acknowledged that the study sample is relatively small and that the concept of reflective practice is difficult to evaluate from the perspective of service recipients. However, given the absence of any substantive research in this area of practice, this empirical study can potentially contribute to the existing available research literature in this area of child care practice. This study will focus on the following two research questions:

- (1) How is the concept of reflective practice understood and used in the context of child care service provision?

- (2) What is the value of using reflective practice in child care service provision?

In addition, this exploratory study will address the following research objectives:

- (1) To elicit the views and experiences of practitioners who use reflective practice in the development of interventions with young people and families.
- (2) To elicit the views of service managers who supervise practitioners involved in the research study, in relation to reflective practice.
- (3) To compare the effectiveness of implementing a structured model of reflective practice (Johns model) using an action research framework, and in the context of a regular unstructured practice environment.

### ***3.1 Questions of Paradigm***

Questions of paradigm represent an important dimension to any research study. A paradigm is defined as “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.105). The paradigm, or worldview, held by a researcher can influence the unfolding research process. Creswell (2009) considers paradigms held by researchers as a general orientation about the nature of research. Ritzer (2000) suggests a paradigm can influence what should be studied, what questions should be asked, and, equally, how data collated is subsequently interpreted. There are different and competing paradigms applied by researchers depending upon their philosophical disposition (Richie, 2010; Creswell, 2009; Guba and Lincoln, 2004; Ritzer, 2000). Guba and Lincoln (2004) identify three aspects or categories that make up a paradigm: firstly, the researcher’s beliefs about the nature of the reality being studied (ontology); secondly, how knowledge is gained (epistemology). The choice of ontology and epistemology will subsequently influence the third paradigm strand, which is the methodological approach employed by the researcher in undertaking the study.

In the context of this research study, my worldview, is informed by a critical theoretical orientation. The critical theoretical worldview incorporates an ontology of historical

realism. As outlined by Guba and Lincoln (2004), this perspective allows reality to be understood. This reality is however shaped by social, political, cultural and economic forces. These forces then perpetuate societal structures through the predominant ideology and through the development of 'false consciousness' (Ritzer, 2000; Fay, 1987; Held, 1980; Freire,1972). As Ritzer (2000) further observes, a state of false consciousness prevails when actors do not have a clear sense of their true class interests. Critical theory induces self-reflection and empowers actors to recognise that their previous consciousness was false. Critical theory promotes a more liberating self-understanding which in turn engenders empowerment and emancipation (Fay, 1987; Held, 1980; Geuss, 1981). In relation to issues of epistemology, the critical theory worldview contends that knowledge gained is value mediated reflectively through the perspective of the researcher. From a critical theoretical perspective, the researcher and the researched are interactively linked. In adopting a critical theory paradigm, it is necessary to adopt a value-mediated approach to all aspects of the enquiry, or what Richie et al. (2010) refer to as 'emphatic neutrality'. Issues in relation to epistemology are particularly relevant in the context of this research study. From a critical theory perspective, it is the process of reflection itself that generates liberating knowledge; the knowledge provided by a critical theory perspective guides towards enlightenment, and the pursuit of one`s true interests from coercion (Geuss, 1981; Habermas, 1983; Mezirow, 1981,1991).

The origins of critical theory can be traced to what is historically known as the Frankfurt School (Held, 1980; Geuss, 1981; Fay, 1987; Ritzer, 2000). The pioneer proponents of the critical theory tradition include Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. Second generation critical theorists such as Habermas contribute significantly to the evolving character of the critical theory tradition. Habermas (1984, 1987) develops critical theory beyond a focus on economic determinism, advocating an analysis which considers issues including social interaction, language and rationality. However, as noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), critical theory is not a singular worldview but rather an evolving family of perspectives which connect through a unity of purpose. For example, critical racism, critical feminism and the emancipatory liberation theology of Paulo

Freire, all belong to the broad and diverse family of the critical theory tradition. Critical theory is underpinned by an ethos and principles which promote empowerment, emancipation, and enlightenment within society (Agger, 2006; Held 1980). Through raising awareness and eradicating false consciousness, the theoretical orientation of critical theory endeavours to reduce oppression, inequality, and social injustice. Essentially, critical theory aspires to bring about positive social change and the development of a more just and egalitarian society.

This worldview is a consistent position to hold in terms of my professional social work background. Critical theory has influenced and informed critical social work practice (Gray et al., 2009; Adams et al., 2002; White et al 2006; Healy, 2006; Fook et al., 2007). Critical social work theory embraces an analysis of society which examines the socially constructed character of society. From this perspective, ruling and powerful social groups are able to defend injustice, oppression, inequality and poverty by their control of language, media, education, and the prevailing political agenda (Held, 2000). The critical social work perspective also recognises the central role and function of power and power relations at both the macro level, and in terms of the hierarchies of power which dominate within society (Gray et al., 2009). The overarching principles and ethos of promoting social justice, and opposing injustice and discrimination within society are fundamental to the social work task and profession. These principles are promoted in the International Federation of Social Work Code of Ethics (2000). Similarly, the Irish Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (2004) advocates freedom of expression, the empowerment of individuals in society, and anti-discriminatory practice. Aspiring to change, confronting oppression, and the transformation of society for the betterment of all, is a perspective that resonates with me and reflects my philosophical orientation. My own belief system has a connection with the critical theory tradition and the core values that underpin the approach. In addition, I subscribe to the perceived benefits and potential for positive social transformation and change that can develop and result through its application.

The work of Jürgen Habermas has particular significance within the specific domains of social work, family support, and indeed, reflective practice. In undertaking this research study, I consider the Habermasian perspective as an outlook which informs the current research study and guides my own critical theoretical orientation. In considering the contribution of Habermas (1984,1987), particularly in relation to his ‘Theory of Communicative Action’, I advance the viewpoint that the philosophy underpinning this perspective reinforces the need for reflective practice, particularly in relation to dialogic interactions with service users. Equally, I believe that the Habermasian perspective promotes genuine partnership, participation and empowerment. This approach is consistent with the practice values of social work and family support service provision and my own philosophical disposition.

Indeed, some of these practice principles can also be found in the Agenda for Children’s Services` Policy Handbook (2007). This document particularly relates to ensuring quality services, planning and evaluating services and practice. Similarly, the values and ethos which inform the process of communicative action can be identified in some of the core practice principles underpinning family support practice as outlined by Dolan et al. (2006). Existing policy and practice aspirations promote working collaboratively with families in a spirit of partnership (Agenda for Children’s Services: A Policy Handbook, 2007). Drawing on a more practical example, I assert that the Family Welfare Conference model/procedure (Marsh et al., 1998; Lupton et al., 1999; Hamilton, 2005), introduced in the Republic of Ireland in 2000, embodies the mechanism and procedure to enable the process of communicative action to develop. Similarly, the imminent introduction in the Republic of Ireland by the Child and Family Agency - TUSLA ( the agency responsible for the provision of child protection and welfare services in Ireland) - of a new national service delivery framework in child care and the introduction of what is described as the ‘Meitheal’ model of working with families in the context of early intervention and preventative family support service provision engenders a process that enables the use of communicative action to be further introduced (Meitheal-Grúpa Daoine Ag Obair Le Chéile-National Guidance & Local Implementation, 2013). Service-user participation, inclusiveness, empowerment and a more egalitarian

framework are inherent in this process. Empowering parents and children to participate and contribute to the development of family support plans designed to help and assist them is a much more respectful and potentially effective way to work with families, is a core tenet of this approach. Empowering families through dialogue and enabling them to decide what support services they require to resolve presenting problems is at the core of this model of working. As Hays et al. (2007) highlight, adopting a more egalitarian and participative approach to working with families, such as that promoted by the Meitheal approach, creates the possibility for empowering dialogue with and between families, as illustrated in the Habermasian theory of communicative action (1984, 1987)

### ***3.2 Qualitative approach***

In undertaking this exploratory research study, I have employed a qualitative research approach. I believe this choice of methodology is reconcilable with my epistemological position which is located within the critical theoretical perspective. For example, the adaptation of a critical theoretical orientation provides an analytical lens through which prevailing social structures and systems can be understood and interpreted from a research perspective. Embracing a critical theoretical approach further equips me with a preparedness to question my own assumptions in undertaking this research study. In regard to the specific research methods employed in this study, I incorporate dialogic methods which are characteristic of a qualitative approach and a favoured technique from the perspective of using a critical theoretical epistemology (Agger, 2006, Comstock, 1994). Furthermore, this research study endeavours to promote a more collaborative approach by involving the research population in setting the research agenda; this is achieved by the use of an action research component of the research design. The methodological approach employed in this study therefore connects with my worldview and enables a probing and searching consideration of presenting data.

The diversity and sometimes contested nature within the qualitative approach is acknowledged within the literature (Richie et al., 2010; Halloway et al., 2010; Silverman, 2006; Bryman, 2005). In addition to the variations inherent within the qualitative methodology, the approach is also influenced and informed by different

paradigms and philosophical worldviews. Issues in relation to ontology and epistemology are also contested areas within the qualitative research approach and represent competing paradigms within qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1994). Furthermore, as noted by Richie et al. (2010), a key ontological debate concerns the nature of the social world and whether or not there is a captive social reality and how this is constructed. There are a number of different ontological perspectives advanced in considering this question. For example, realism, which purports that an external reality exists independent of people's beliefs or understandings about it. Secondly, materialism, which suggests that there is a real world but only the material features of that world hold reality. Finally, idealism which contends that reality is only known through the human mind and essentially developed as a result of socially constructed meanings.

Similarly, diverse and competing epistemological positions also exist regarding the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired. For example, positivism contends that the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for the study of social phenomena because human behaviour is governed by law-like regularities. This perspective also advances the view that the world is independent of and not affected by the researcher (Richie et al. 2010). Alternatively, interpretivism holds that scientific methods are not appropriate in undertaking social research because the social world is not governed by law-like regularities, but rather is mediated through meaning and the influence of human agency. Interpretivism also holds that the researcher and the social world can impact on each other. This view further suggests that social research is concerned with enquiring and understanding the social world using both the experience of the participant and the researcher. Despite the diversity inherent within the qualitative methodology, the tradition is embedded within interpretivism (Bryman, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). As outlined above, this involves qualitative researchers observing and trying to understand the meaning that actors themselves bring to situations they experience. This point is highlighted by Richie et al. (2010, p.3): “... *that qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meaning which people attach to phenomena (actors, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social world*”.

Further reinforcing the potential advantages of using a qualitative approach and defending the use of the methodology in the context of this research study, I believe that the use of a qualitative methodology is appropriate in terms of addressing the overarching research objectives of the study which seek to understand the meaning research participants attribute to the concept of reflective practice. As Halloway (2010) acknowledges, the ability and benefits of qualitative researchers being able to immerse themselves through observing, questioning and listening in the context of undertaking empirical research is a distinct advantage of employing this methodology. These research traits suggest that using a qualitative methodology can provide, in the context of this exploratory study, the most suitable approach to elicit rich and insightful data and, thereby, address the overarching research questions that underpin the study.

### ***3.3 Research design***

In order to address the research questions and achieve the study objectives of this exploratory research thesis a multi-method research design was employed. This multi-method research design involved obtaining data from four primary sources. These primary sources included: practitioners, service managers, data regarding the use of reflective journals and, finally, from an action research component of the study. In relation to the action research component of the research study, it should be highlighted that the author essentially participated in this process as an ‘insider researcher’. As noted by Ronson (2002, p.404) there are a number of advantages in undertaking this role that render the ‘insider researcher’ as being an additional resource to the study. Some of the benefits of being an insider researcher identified by Ronson include having an intimate knowledge of the local context in terms of its historical and developmental history. In addition, having an awareness and understanding of the politics surrounding the organisation being researched is a further benefit identified. Ronson further acknowledges the advantage of an ‘insider researcher’ having local street credibility as someone who knows and understands the practice environment and what front line practice entails. Finally, an additional benefit identified is having a general familiarity

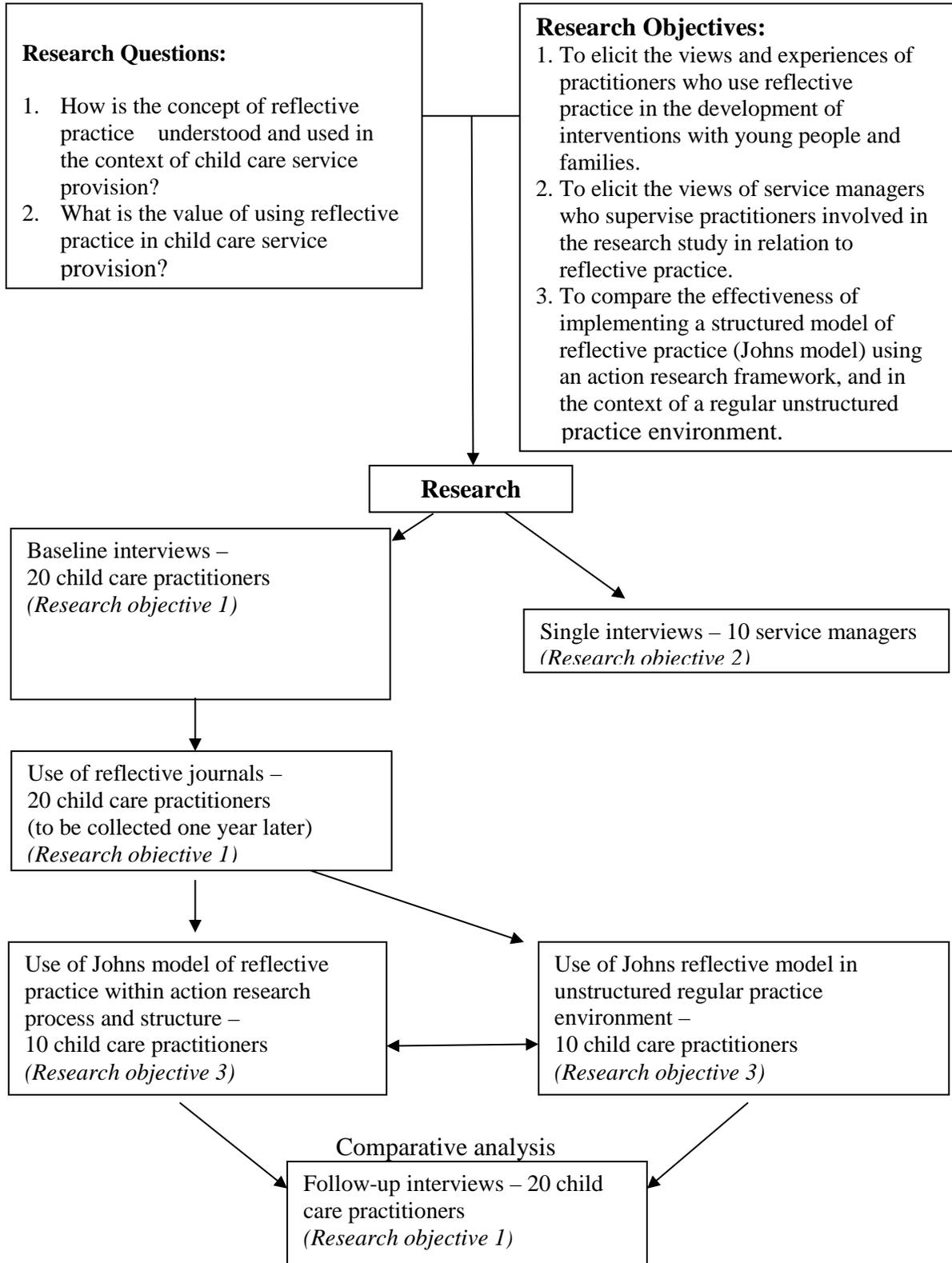
with local information that would take an outsider a considerably longer period of time to acquire.

Each of the primary sources of data employed in this study is set out in Figure 13 below. A brief description of each source of data is further outlined in the following sections of this chapter. For the purposes of clarity, the use of an action research component in the study involved embedding a comparative element to the research design. This comparative element involved the use of the Johns reflective model, by ten practitioners, in the context of a structured action research framework and process. This use of the Johns model in a structured action research setting was then compared with the use of the Johns model, by ten other practitioners, in an unstructured and more routine practice environment. This aspect of the research design and a detailed description of the action research approach utilised will be set out in the following section.

There is a plethora of reflective models available to assist practitioners while they engage in the reflective process. In the context of this research study the Johns model of structured reflection was chosen for a number of specific reasons. Firstly, the Johns model is, by design, a model of structured reflection. This reflective design is consistent with the overall research methodology that seeks to explore the use of reflective practice in a structured setting. According to Johns (2009, p.51), this structured approach acts as a guide to enable practitioners to access the depth and breadth of reflection necessary for learning through experience. The inclusion of core and cue questions prompts a sequential process that assists the practitioner to engage in the reflective process. Secondly, the Johns model is informed by learning theory and incorporates a central theoretical dimension linked to the development of experiential learning. In addition, the Johns model is one of the few reflective models that potentially enables, through the use of in-depth cue questions, the use of critical reflective practice. Johns was an advocate of the critical reflective approach and linked the true value of reflective practice to its emancipatory potential, as illustrated in the conceptual idea of Mezirow's idea of perspective transformation and Paulo Freire's idea of conscientization (Johns, 2009, p.7).

In selecting the Johns model the author was cognizant that while the Johns model was developed for nursing the model is nonetheless applicable to any field. According to Johns (2000) the model of structured reflection is a technique that is particularly helpful for practitioners who are at the beginning stages of learning how to reflect. This aspect of the model was a factor in selecting the approach in the context of this research study. Moreover, the Johns model is reflectively generic in that the structured approach identifies particular areas of reflective practice that can assist while engaging in the reflective process. For example, describing experience, focusing on personal intentions, incorporating empathy and recognising one`s own values and beliefs. Finally, the Johns model was preferred because it seeks, through the process of reflection, to enhance practice and improve methods and approaches of working with families and service users.

**Figure 12: Research Design Diagram**



### ***3.3.1 Qualitative triangulation***

As outlined in the above section, this study employed different research methods and used various sources of data in order to enhance the depth and richness of the research. The approach of utilising multiple methods and sources of data is referred to in the literature as ‘triangulation’ (Bryman, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Richie, 2010; Silverman, 2006; Hardy and Bryman, 2004). Triangulation is considered a research strategy designed to secure more in-depth understanding of research phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). As Silverman (2007, p.36) also observes, “*Triangulation assumes that looking at an object from more than one standpoint provides researchers and theorists with more comprehensive knowledge about the object*”. Hardy and Bryman (2004) highlight how the process of triangulation can open up different facets of complex phenomena to view. Richie (2010) also comments that triangulation enhances validity in qualitative research. The following observation by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.5) capture the essence of triangulation as a process which “*...is best understood as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any enquiry*”.

It should be noted that before embarking on this research study it was necessary to obtain the approval and support of the local child care manager. (see Appendix A). This was particularly pertinent in relation to the release of child care staff to participate in the various components of the study design.

### ***3.3.2 Child care practitioners***

Twenty social care practitioners participated in the research study. These practitioners were randomly selected from an overall practitioner population of eighty, that is, eighty practitioners from within the county where the research took place. This practitioner sample was made up of social workers (7) and child care workers (13). A computer-based app ([www.Transum.org](http://www.Transum.org)) was employed to assist with the random selection process in conjunction with a human resource database of child care staff employed by the Health Service Executive. The practitioners selected were sent a written outline of

the study proposal (see Appendix B) and invited to participate in the research. Permission was also obtained from senior child care management in the area allowing the practitioners to participate in the research study. Two participants declined to participate. Two additional practitioners were again randomly selected from the child care population and invited to participate. An overview of specific characteristics relating to practitioners who participated in the research was collated including employment status (see Appendix C), academic qualifications (see Appendix D) and work experience (see Appendix E). The twenty child care practitioners who agreed to participate in the study were provided with training in relation to the Johns model of reflective practice and using a reflective journal. This training consisted of a PowerPoint presentation presented by the author (see Appendix F). The training session lasted approximately three hours. Following this training, the twenty child care practitioners were then randomly split into two separate groups of ten. The development of these separate groupings was designed to enable the researcher to compare the use of reflective practice in two different practice settings (e.g. within the context of a structured action research framework compared to the unstructured non-action research setting). Practitioners in both groups underwent an individual baseline and follow-up interview at the beginning of the study and one year later.

### ***3.3.3 Cohort group (a): The non-action research group***

This group of practitioners used the Johns model in the context of a regular unstructured practice setting. In other words these individual practitioners were invited to use the Johns model in their existing practice environment. Practitioners in cohort group (a) were also invited to retain a reflective journal during the course of the one year research study. The researcher had minimal contact with practitioners in this group during the period of the research study and checked in with individual practitioners by telephone on one occasion during the one year period of the research study.

### ***3.3.4 Cohort group (b): The action research group***

Practitioners in cohort group (b) were invited to participate in a process using action research to implement the Johns reflective model over the course of one year. The use of

an action research approach also involved the author as a co-participant of the study. A more detailed outline of the action research process will follow in this chapter. The use of an action research methodology involved a more rigorous, systematic and searching implementation of the Johns reflective model. Research participants in cohort group (b) were also invited to utilise and retain a reflective journal as part of their reflective practice. During the study, the researcher observed and recorded the experiences of the action research group (or cohort b). The researcher also monitored the experiences of cohort group (b) through checking in with individual practitioners during the research. The author paid particular attention to the reported benefits, effectiveness and learning potential involved in using a reflective model and process in the context of this more structured framework.

### ***3.3.5 Service managers***

In addition to the twenty child care practitioners, ten service managers from different services were also invited to participate in the study (for profile of managers - see Appendix G). These managers were selected on the basis that they had a supervisory relationship with one of the twenty child care workers. The rationale for including managers was to obtain a managerial perspective in relation to the value this group placed on the reflective process and the extent to which they used and supported reflective practice. All ten managers participated in one interview with the researcher during the period of the action research process.

### ***3.3.6 The use of reflective journals***

The use of reflective journals was also included in this research study to evaluate the benefits of using a journal and to ascertain the extent to which practitioners in the research study used a reflective journal while engaging in the reflective process. The benefits of using a reflective journal are highlighted in the literature (Bolton, 2010; Johns, 2009; Knott, 2007; Moon, 2006). Each practitioner was provided with an A4 hard copy book to use as a reflective journal. Practitioners were requested to hand back their reflective journal to the researcher at the conclusion of the research study for the

purposes of data analysis. The journals would then be returned to each practitioner at the conclusion of the study.

### ***3.3.7 The perspective of service users***

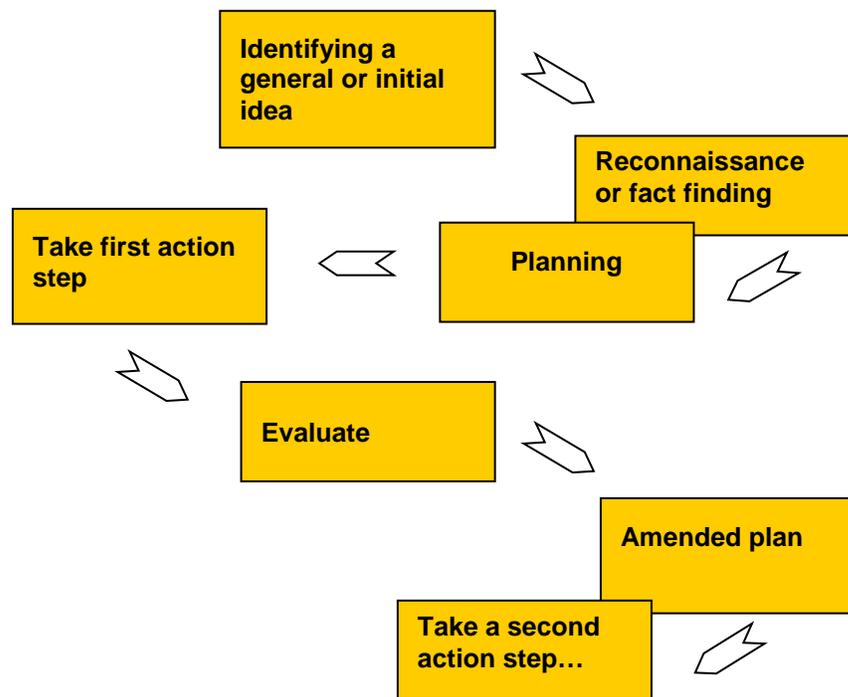
The initial research design incorporated a dimension which sought to obtain the views of families who received services from reflective practitioners - one family per practitioner in each cohort group was initially recruited. The inclusion of service users was designed to enable families to articulate their experience and their perception of receiving services/interventions from reflective practitioners. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventeen families to elicit their views regarding the value and effectiveness of reflective interventions. Families were also asked to comment on their experience of services provided to them by practitioners involved in the study. Family involvement was dependent on voluntary participation and also with the agreement of the agency working with the family. However, following analysis of interview data in relation to this participant grouping, it was not possible to elicit any substantive information which could inform the research study. The concept of reflective practice is an elusive phenomenon for service users to be aware of or to understand. In terms of data analysis it was difficult to make a connection with a practitioner's use or non-use of reflective practice and the subsequent experience of a service user. This data was therefore not included in the research study. Families involved in this component of the research study have been advised that their interview data was not used and the reason for this non-use. (see Appendix H)

### ***3.4 The use of action research***

This study employed action research as a central research approach. Describing action research, Reason and Bradbury (2008, p.1) assert, "...*action research is a participatory democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview*". Action research involves the initiation of collaborative action and research which is designed to solve presenting problems while simultaneously generating new knowledge (Coghlan, 2010). The action research method finds its origins in the work of Kurt Lewin who is

considered in the literature as the first person to utilise the term ‘action research’ (Morton-Cooper, 2000; Greenwood et al., 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Hart et al., 2008). The approach developed by Lewin in 1946, and outlined in the following illustration, incorporates the essential action research process. Indeed, this diagram and the trajectory of steps included describes the action research process as used in this research study to address and resolve presenting problems.

**Figure 13: Lewin's action research process**

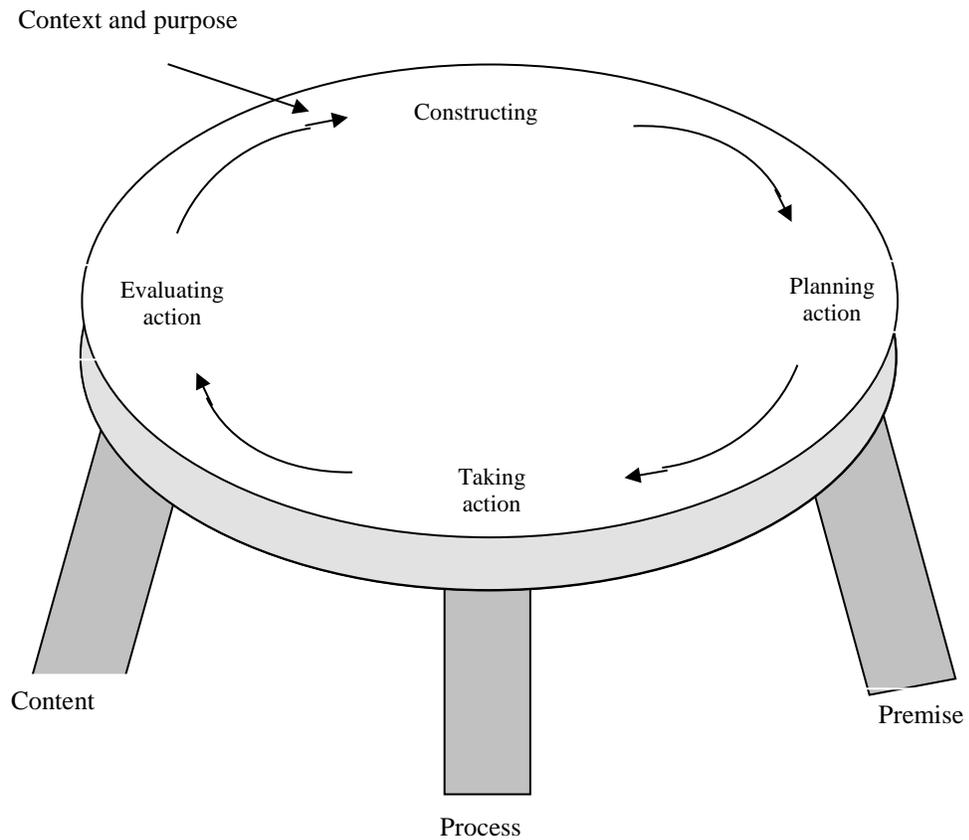


The action research approach utilised in this study involved a cyclical process of identifying a problem area or change situation. This first stage of the process involved identifying a problem area to be addressed (Step 1). The second stage of the process involved the implementation of the reflective plan and proposed solution to address the issue (Step 2). The next stage of the process involved re-grouping and evaluating how the implementation process had progressed and what issues, if any, had arisen (Step 3). The next stage of the process involved reflection on the process and emergent issues and

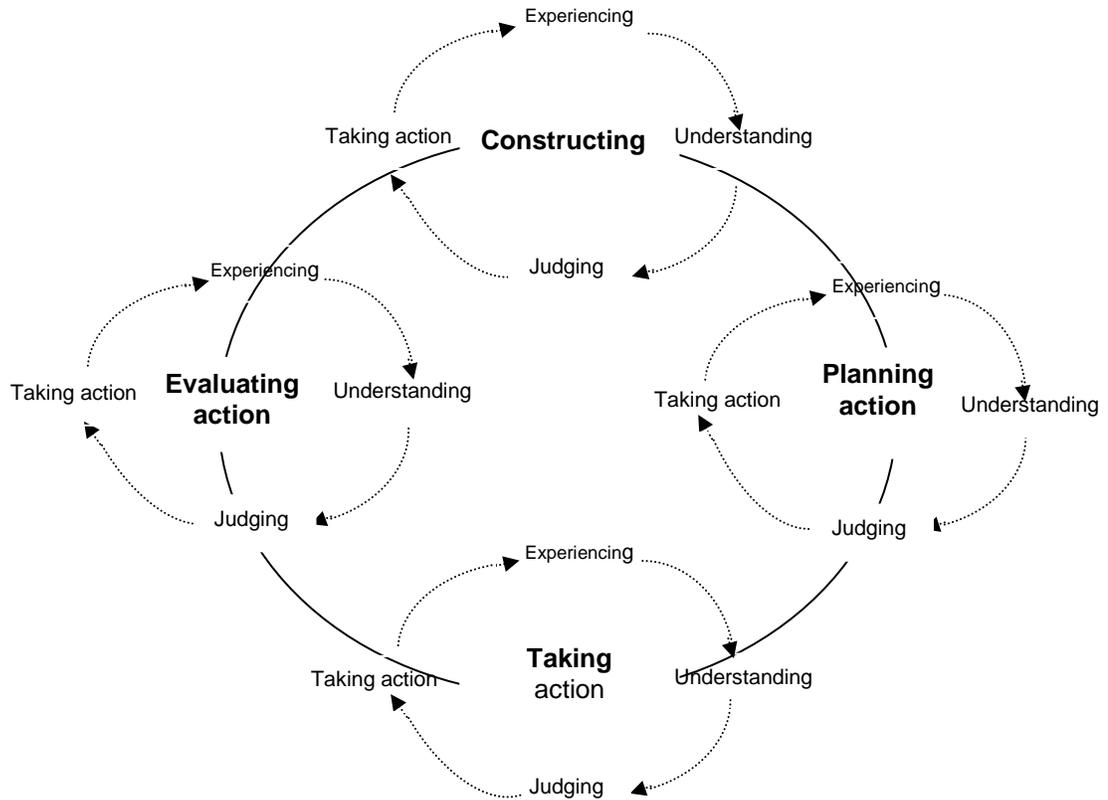
further planning towards progressing forward and resolving the presenting issues (Step 4). The four-stage process is then repeated until a satisfactory resolution is achieved.

The following diagrams (Figures 15 & 16) by Coghlan et al. (2010, p.12) illustrate the action research cyclical process involved and utilised in undertaking this research study.

**Figure 14: Meta cycle of action research**



**Figure 15: The general empirical method in action research projects**



As a methodology, action research aligns with the qualitative research tradition (Coghlan, 2010). The action research process itself, as utilised in this research study, incorporates flexibility and the potential to be fluid and responsive to the changing research agendas set by the collaborative action research group. The action research process focuses on particular change situations as they emerge. The process can therefore be unpredictable in terms of emergent issues. Nevertheless, the results can be very insightful and informative. For the purposes of this research study, the advantages of using an action research approach is justified by the depth of insight gained through the exploratory and participatory nature of the action research process. Employing an action research approach provides an opportunity to observe the advantages of using a structured framework to implement a model of reflective practice. Potential problems

and identified difficulties can be resolved through the responsive nature of the action research process. Using action research in the context of this study enables the development of new understandings and enhanced insight into the benefits of using reflective practice. It also highlights areas that were problematic and restrictive in terms of the use of reflective practice in front-line service provision.

Action research also aligns well with critical theory. Action research aims to address problems and bring about change (Coghlan, 2010). Action research also aspires to engender enhanced understanding and self-awareness. Through raising awareness, action research is a potentially liberating experience for those involved. These research characteristics are consistent with the fundamental aspirations of the critical theoretical tradition (Fay, 1987). Moreover, it is highlighted by some commentators that action research evolved out of the critical theory tradition (McNiff et al., 2006; Crookes et al., 1998). Park (in Reason and Bradbury, 2001) also identifies the connection with critical theory and the participatory nature of action research in the generation of reflective knowledge. Action research by its nature enables practitioners to contribute directly to the development of reflective knowledge, a central tenet of this research study. Equally, action research is an inherently dialogic process. Through dialogue and reflection the process contributes to bringing about change which is a further characteristic of the critical theory tradition. A comprehensive exploration of the action research process used in this research and the resulting findings from this process will be presented in Chapter Six.

### ***3.5 Using reflexivity as a methodological approach***

While using qualitative research methods there is a need for researchers to evidence transparency in the research process being employed by them, and, equally, to demonstrate their endeavours to remain neutral and objective. As noted by Creswell (2000), researchers themselves make choices about what is important and appropriate to study based on aspects of their personal history, social background and cultural assumptions. Similarly, Fook et al. (2007, p.28) highlight the importance of researchers being aware of ‘self’ in the context of undertaking the research process: “*We are often*

*responsible for interpreting, selecting, prioritizing , sometimes seeing and not seeing, and using knowledge in particular ways that are to do with a myriad of things about ourselves and our social and historical situations.”*

The importance of being cognisant of ‘self ’while engaging in qualitative research is further reinforced by Finlay (2002, p.531) who contends that: “*As qualitative researchers, we understand that the researcher is a central figure who influences the collection, selection and interpretation of data*”.

Underlining the necessity to adopt a strategy to ensure that, as far as possible, transparency, neutrality and objectivity in the research process are being applied in the context of this study, the author has sought to:

1. To highlight awareness in relation to maintaining objectivity, neutrality and transparency in the context of the qualitative research approach employed.
2. To acknowledge the location of the author in the research process and guard against research bias.
3. To acknowledge the author`s own philosophical orientation towards a critical theoretical perspective and that this orientation did not influence the research approach used, or the subsequent development of practice knowledge or emergent findings.
4. To acknowledge the author`s professional affiliation to the area of Social Work practice and his twenty years of experience as a practitioner in this field.
5. To acknowledge the author`s professional acquaintance with some the research participants in the research study.
6. To acknowledge that the author`s own immediate line manager was a participant in the research process and interviewed by the author.

To assist in my endeavours to maintain a neutral and objective approach while undertaking this qualitative research study I embraced the concept of reflexivity. As noted by Guba and Lincoln (2000, p.183), “*Reflexivity is the process of reflecting*

*critically on the self as researcher, the human as instrument*". The need to adopt a reflexive approach in undertaking qualitative research is further highlighted in the research literature (Holloway et al., 2010; Richie et al., 2010; Hardy, 2009; Patton, 2002). Finlay presents five reflexive strategies to assist in the reflexive process. These strategies reflect the different philosophical orientations that may inform and influence the research process.

1. **Introspection:** This is an exploration of one's own experience and meaning to further insights and interpretation in the research.
2. **Intersubjective Reflection:** This type of reflexivity focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the participants. The researcher has to be aware of the way in which the relationship affects the research.
3. **Mutual Collaboration:** The participants are part of the research and their own reflection on it influences the context of the relationships, and this in turn affects the process of the research. The account is an outcome of collaboration between the partners, the researcher and the participant. Researchers must be aware of this.
4. **Social Critique:** Reflexivity as a social critique is linked to the power relationship and the social position of the researcher and participant which have an impact on the research. The researcher must acknowledge this impact.
5. **Discursive Deconstruction:** This type of reflexivity is linked to language and the variety of meaning inherent within it. Researchers concede in their writing that the findings can have multiple meaning and focus on the construction of the text.

The following strategy was developed by me as a guide to ensure a reflexive approach was evident, and in order to maximise the validity and trustworthiness of the research approach utilised:

1. Development and maintenance of an audit trail relating to research process. This specifically involved setting out in the clearest and most transparent way the research methodology employed, e.g. research process, analytical framework used; transcription of interviews; retention of minutes from action research process (for an example of minutes - see Appendix I); retention of memos written to self (for an example of memos - see Appendix J), and use of own reflective journal.
2. Regularly questioning and reviewing data collated. This was achieved through the analytical framework employed (Grounded Theory) and the use of an iterative and systematic analytical approach that incorporated constant comparative analysis
3. Being open to review interview transcripts or other research material to ensure balance and consistency (as per above analytical process). Seventeen family interview transcripts were withdrawn from the research process because of issues pertaining to balance and consistency
4. Furnishing action research colleagues with a summary report of the action research process and inviting feedback for accuracy. (see Appendix K)
5. Using academic supervision and academic committee to ensure a commitment to objectivity, transparency and balance was being applied to research process. (Work was continually reviewed in the context of academic supervision. The author also presented work to his academic committee on three occasions seeking feedback and advice on particular aspects of the work completed)

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

This research study was informed by a Grounded Theory approach. Grounded Theory offers an analytical framework and research guidelines that can facilitate an in-depth scrutiny and analysis of the research data collated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2010; Pidgeon et al., 2009). The iterative and systematic process that underpins a Grounded Theory approach enables the development of ideas and concepts based on the data collated. This point is highlighted by (Charmaz, 2006, p.2). “...*grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collating and analysing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves*” . The constant comparative analysis that is characteristic of the Grounded Theory process lends procedural rigour to the analytical method and the emergent findings (Charmaz, 2010; Pidgeon et al., 2009). As Charmaz (2010) also observes, Grounded Theory involves a searching analysis of data which systematically unpacks and interrogates presenting information using procedures and practices that are incisive and insightful in relation to the emergent concepts and theories.

#### **3.6.1 Grounded theory process**

The first step in using a Grounded Theory approach in relation to data analysis is the process of coding data. As noted by Charmaz (2010, p.43), “*Coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data. Your codes show you how to select, separate and sort data to begin an analytical accounting of them*” Coding involves two phases. During initial coding the researcher studies fragments of data, e.g. words, lines and incidents for analytical import. This is followed by a second more ‘focused’ phase of coding, where the researcher selects the most useful initial codes and tests them against other extensive data collected. Throughout this dual coding process data collected is subject to ongoing constant comparative analysis to identify themes, trends, differences and commonalities.

In the context of this research study my own practical use of initial coding of data was employed by me in reviewing baseline practitioner interview scripts. The initial coding process involved the highlighting or underlining of words, sentences or particular

elements of practitioner accounts that were deemed noteworthy. This initial coding was then followed by more focused coding whereby I again reviewed the interview scripts only this time writing notes on the side of the page identifying a specific theme or issue. Some of these more specific themes, upon further analysis, would then potentially evolve into more substantive theoretical categories regarding the use of reflective practice or relate to the value of the reflective process, the enabling factors or the barriers that might inhibit the use of the approach. This coding process was also used by me to code and analyse other research data collated such as minutes taken from action research meetings. For the purposes of describing the action research process used and how data from this process was captured, minutes of meetings held with action research participants were recorded. Each problem area addressed using the action research approach was recorded in detail. This process will be set out in chapter six. The action research component of the research design will be set out in detail in the next section. My use of initial and focused coding was further informed by an ongoing process involving a constant comparative analysis of all data coded.

The next step in using a Grounded Theory approach relates to the use of memos. As noted by Charmaz (2010, p.72), *“When you write memos, you stop and analyse your ideas about the codes in any -and every - way that occurs to you during the moment... memos catch your thoughts , capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions you wish to pursue”*.

During the course of this research study the researcher retained reflective memos to assist in recording specific incidents, points of learning, researcher observations and other data that might inform the research study at different points in time. In addition, these memos were used throughout the analytical phase of the study to capture thoughts and ideas considered significant or noteworthy for myself whilst analysing data. The value of using memos to capture data is highlighted by Charmaz (2010). These memos were retained as part of the Nvivo data storage and retrieval programme and written up during the course of the research study.

The third step in using the Grounded Theory process involves what is termed theoretical sampling. As noted by Charmaz (2006, p.102), “*Theoretical sampling involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry*”. As tentative ideas emerge using initial coding, themes and analytical categories begin to develop. Theoretical sampling is then employed to further illuminate these analytical categories through an ongoing interrogation of the data and by the use of constant comparative analysis of the data. Using theoretical sampling enables the researcher to identify the more substantive analytical categories while using a grounded theory approach. As noted by Glaser et al. (2008, p.45), “*Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges*”

According to Charmaz (2006, p.104), the specific advantages of using theoretical sampling are:

- To delineate the properties of a category
- To check hunches about categories
- To saturate the properties of a category
- To distinguish between categories
- To clarify relationships between categories
- To identify variation in a process.

However, it should be noted that categories are saturated and the process exhausted when following ongoing review of the data nothing different emerges or no fresh or additional insights and properties can be revealed. This aspect of the Grounded Theory approach was applied in the context of this research study.

### ***3.7 Action research data analysis***

The participatory nature and method of action research necessitates the use of a specific data analysis approach: “*Action research should be judged not by the criteria of*

*positivist science, but rather the criteria of its own terms*” (Coghlan et al., 2010, p.14). Reason and Bradbury (2006) suggest the use of choice-points to ensure quality within the action research process. The five choice-points (or questions) advocated by Reason and Bradbury (2006) essentially interrogate the process being used. This framework places emphasis on issues of relevance in terms of the action research approach being implemented and the overall usefulness of the research study process. The choice-points as advanced by Reason and Bradbury (2006) are outlined in the box below. This framework was utilised to assist in the analysis of the action research approach employed in this research study.

Issues as choice-points and questions for quality in action research
Is the action research:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Explicit in developing a praxis of relational-participation?</li><li>- Guided by reflexive concern for practical knowing?</li><li>- Inclusive of plurality of knowing?</li></ul>
Ensuring conceptual-theoretical integrity?
Embracing ways of knowing beyond the intellect?
Intentionally choosing appropriate research methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Worthy of the term significant</li><li>- Emerging towards a new and enduring infrastructure</li></ul>

In applying the above framework advanced by Reason and Bradbury (2010), the following choice-points and questions were addressed in the context of the Action Research component of the study:

**(1) Explicit in developing a praxis of relational participation?**

Participation in the action research process was based upon the voluntary involvement of each practitioner. Parent agencies agreed to release each participant and were made aware of the nature of the research being undertaken and were supportive of same. The action research process was democratic and inclusive. The consistent level of attendance by each participant and the volume of issues addressed during the action research

process provide evidence of the level of involvement and co-operation between all action research participants. A relational and participative dynamic was evident in the context of the action research process employed during this component of the research study.

**(2) Guided by reflexive concern for practical knowing?**

In addressing the various problem-areas which were identified using the action research process, there was continuous reflection regarding the nature of the presenting problem and regarding the nature of the solutions identified by the group to resolve the problems. This involved collective dialogue and discussion. In some instances problem areas had to undergo several cycles of the action research process to resolve the issue. This entailed additional reflection and consideration of the issue by the collective group. Each action research group meeting and agreed plan was recorded and reviewed while individual participants also employed their reflective journals as another source of reflection. The impetus of the action research process placed an emphasis on problem-solving and collegial learning and the development of practical knowledge and solutions to presenting issues and problems encountered.

**(3) Inclusive of plurality of knowing?**

Problem areas identified using the action research process were addressed through the involvement of practitioners from different disciplines with different levels of experience and from a number of different agencies e.g. voluntary and statutory. This eclectic mix of experience and organisational background resulted in a plurality of knowledge being pooled to address presenting issues.

**(4) Worthy of the term significant?**

The action research process was used in the context of this research study to assist in undertaking an exploration of the value and use of reflective practice in the context of child care service provision. It is my contention that this is an important piece of research regarding a conceptual entity that is under-researched and which has the

potential to positively impact of the quality of practice provided to service users and therefore represents a significant area of research.

#### **(5) Emerging towards a new and enduring infrastructure**

As a component part of the research design in this study, the use of action research has the potential to add to the existing body of knowledge in relation to reflective practice and generate new learning in this area of child care service provision. One central point of potential learning in this study relates to the benefits of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment. The use of the action research framework provides the structural practice environment that can potentially empower and support practitioners to more effectively engage in the reflective process. The importance of such structural support may provide new insight into the need to develop similar enduring infrastructures to support practitioners in their use of reflective practice.

In addition to utilising the above framework, I will also adhere to the cyclical and iterative process inherent within the action research cycles as outlined by Coghlan et al. (2010). Colleagues in the action research group will also be involved in reviewing and interpreting the data collated. The inclusion of action research colleagues in the data analysis is considered a quality criteria and safeguard in maintaining validity within action research (Coghlan et al., 2010). Similarly, given the central role played by the author in the action research process, an awareness and understanding of one's assumptions and impact on the research process and the data collected are pertinent issues of which I am alert to. In dealing with this aspect of the study, I was guided and informed by the process of conscious reflection using reflexivity as outlined in section 3.5.

### ***3.8 Data management***

In addition to the use of Grounded Theory as a central analytical strategy in this research study, some specific analytical aids will also be employed to assist in the analysis of data collated. Firstly, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Action research meetings held were recorded using detailed minutes. Secondly, a process of

using coding and memos to assist with data analysis was also employed. This approach further assisted in the collation, storing and retrieval of data. Finally, Nvivo software was utilised as a code and retrieve software package. I employed this software to assist in identifying and coding themes and concepts as they emerged in the data. This software also enables data to be analysed in terms of emerging trends and themes whilst always allowing me to compare and contrast data in various formulations including tables, charts and graphs. (For examples of the Nvivo system and process used, see Appendices L - P)

### ***3.9 Ethical considerations***

In undertaking this research study, ethical considerations were of paramount importance. Ethical considerations are significant because such issues are directly linked to the integrity of the study Bryman (2004). Ethical considerations also highlight the role of values in relation to what is appropriate and acceptable whilst undertaking research. There are some well documented cases in the literature of reported ethical misconduct in social and medical research where the impact on participants was harmful and unjustifiable (Bryman, 2004; Gomm et al., 2004; Crookes, 2004). Social research is governed by ethical principles and the imperative that researchers adhere to such principles to safeguard research participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2004; Bryman, 2004; Crookes et al., 2004; Richie et al., 2003). In the context of this research study, a formal application for ethical approval was sought and obtained from the National University of Ireland, Galway. This author adhered to this code of ethics throughout the research study. The following outline will describe the ethical principles followed in relation to the research project overall and also in regard to the action research component of the study, which requires a separate description.

#### ***3.9.1 Informed consent***

Before embarking upon this research project, it was necessary to obtain the informed consent of each research participant. Informed consent as an ethical principle means that potential participants are made aware of the research study and understand what the research study is about. Participants must also be advised about the nature of the study

and what will be expected of them. In the context of this study, two different participant groupings were involved, child care professionals and service managers. In order to ensure that potential participants were adequately informed about the research study, separate arrangements were put in place with each group and individual to ensure that informed consent was adequately explained.

Following the random selection of twenty child care professionals into two cohort groupings consisting of ten practitioners in each group, each participant was individually contacted by the researcher. Each individual participant was given a verbal outline of the proposed study. This was followed up with a more detailed written outline being sent to each participant setting out and explaining the aims and objectives of the study, the research design to be employed, approximate timeframes, and the level of commitment that would be involved from participants (see Appendix Q). The voluntary nature of the research study was also explained. Potential research participants were then given several weeks to consider their position regarding becoming involved. The next stage in the process involved inviting the child care practitioners, as potential research participants, to an initial information/training meeting. During this initial meeting the researcher gave a PowerPoint presentation outlining again the nature of the research study and the research design. During this session the researcher also highlighted the voluntary nature of participation in the study and the option for participants to terminate their involvement at any time during the research. Participants who agreed to take part in the study were then asked to complete a signed consent form in relation to their involvement in the study. Further details in relation to the study were then provided to participants regarding the study design. The second research grouping involved in the study, service managers, were contacted individually by the researcher. Following an initial telephone conversation the researcher met with each manager and outlined the nature of the research study. Each manager was then provided with a written outline of the research study and invited to participate in a single interview at a time to be agreed.

As outlined earlier, 17 service users were also initially invited to participate in the research study. These service users were selected using the criteria that they had recently

or currently worked with and received an intervention from a child care practitioner who was participating in the research study. Participants from this grouping were contacted in writing by the researcher and sent an outline of the research study and research design. Participants were then invited to provide their written consent to participate in the research study (See Appendix R). The process of involving participants from this grouping was governed by the need to ensure that they were making an informed decision to participate in the research study and that their participation was voluntary in nature. As outlined earlier, the data collected from this grouping was subsequently not used.

### ***3.9.2 Confidentiality/Anonymity***

The issue of confidentiality is an important and sensitive issue in the context of social research. Professionals who agreed to participate in this research study were advised from the outset by the researcher that they would not be identified and that any contributions made by any participant would not be quoted unless in circumstances where prior agreement was reached with a particular participant about the inclusion of a quotation.

### ***3.9.3 Risks of harm to participants***

The risk of causing potential upset or distress triggered by the interview process was highlighted to each research participant. However, assurances were also given that every endeavour would be made by the researcher to avoid such upset. The various supports that would be available in the event that a participant became upset or distressed were also highlighted. These supports included the following provisions. Firstly, in the context of the planned inclusion of service users - that their case-worker would be available to provide direct and immediate support if required. Secondly, in the event that a practitioner involved in the study required support - that his/her team leader would be available or that the issue could be addressed in context of supportive supervision that would be made available. Finally, it was further agreed that the local psychology department could be approached to provide additional support, to research participants, should the need arise.

### ***3.9.4 Security of data collected***

Research participants were given assurances by the researcher that any data collected in the course of the study would be securely maintained at all times. Assurances were also required under the ethical approval obtained from the National University of Ireland, Galway by the researcher that any data collected would be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

### ***3.9.5 Action Research: Ethical considerations***

As this research study incorporates the use of an action research component, I placed particular attention on ethical considerations arising from this process. The action research methodology involves unpredictability in relation to the identification of issues and problems to be addressed and solved. Equally, the direction of the research taken by the action research group can also be unpredictable. There is also uncertainty about group dynamics and how individuals within the action research group will interact and bond. There is therefore a degree of potential risk for participants involved in the process owing to the unpredictable nature of the methodology. In addressing these issues in terms of ethical considerations, at the outset of the research, the researcher informed the action research participants about the action research process and the dynamics involved including the degree of unpredictability inherent in the process. The action research group established specific ground-rules governing all aspects of group meetings, including the confidentiality of the group. This also related to participants retaining a reflective journal that would be handed over to the researcher at the end of the action research process. The group also agreed protocols regarding meetings and respect for each other's point of view. The action research participants were also aware of the voluntary nature of the process and that anyone could terminate their involvement at any time during the process. It should also be highlighted that the action research methodology is inherently democratic and collaborative in that action research participants themselves determine the subjects and methods of work (Brydon-Miller et al., 2006). Further, as noted by Coghlan et al., (2010, p.46), a distinctive feature of the action research process is the element of co-operative inquiry that develops where participants work together in an inquiry group as both 'co-researchers and subjects'

### ***3.10 Limitations of study***

In undertaking this research, I identified a number of limitations pertaining to the study. Firstly, it is recognised that the study sample was relatively small. Therefore, interpreting findings emerging from the research study should be informed by the limited numerical range and scope of the research. A further limitation relates to the difficulty of assessing the impact of reflective practice from the perspective of service users. This issue may highlight the need for further more specific research in this area using a tailored research design and methodology to explore the experience of parents as service recipients. The limitations of the study will be further discussed in the conclusions of the study.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter I have endeavoured to set out the research methodology and specific methods employed in undertaking the study. At the beginning of the chapter the overarching rationale, research questions, and the objectives of the study are presented. In essence, this study seeks to ascertain the views of child care practitioners and service managers in relation to their use of reflective practice and the perceived benefits that they afford to its application. In addition, I further set out the philosophical orientation of critical theory. This perspective represents my own worldview and is, therefore, an influential factor in underpinning the research approach adopted. In this chapter I also outline the qualitative research design employed in the study which includes a description of qualitative triangulation and the different sources of data used to inform the research study. I also present an outline of the Grounded Theory approach employed in the study to evaluate and analyse data collated. This chapter further incorporates an outline of the action research component of the research study and the process involved in applying this specific methodological approach. In terms of maintaining research objectivity, I employed reflexivity as research strategy to assist in maintaining transparency, research neutrality and to nullify any potential researcher bias. This chapter also addresses issues pertaining to ethical considerations in undertaking the study. These ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, issues of

confidentiality, potential risk to participants and security of data collected. Finally, in undertaking this research study, I acknowledge the limitations pertaining to the research study and make some recommendations in this regard.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### ***Introduction***

Findings in relation to this research study will be presented in three separate chapters. In this chapter findings regarding how practitioners define the concept of reflective practice will be outlined. This will be followed by the presentations of findings in relation to how practitioners apply the reflective approach. The final area of data to be presented in this chapter relates to findings regarding the perceived barriers that constrain the use of reflective practice. Findings in this chapter will be based on the data collated from baseline and follow-up interviews undertaken with practitioners. The perspective of managers who participated in the study will be included in each section of this chapter. Finally, findings will also be presented in relation to the above three areas regarding the action research and non-action research groups. As already outlined, this data will be presented in the context of baseline and follow-up interviews. It should be noted that there were no systemic differences between the action research and non-action research groups at baseline that might have affected any differences that could be seen at follow-up.

### ***4. Practitioners' understanding of reflective practice***

I will begin this chapter with the presentation of findings in relation to how practitioners described their understanding of reflective practice and how this conceptual understanding compared between baseline and follow-up interviews. In defining reflective practice the vast majority of practitioners described their actual use of the approach as opposed to any detailed technical or theoretical description. Findings will also be presented in this section in relation to notable differences identified between research participants in the action research and non-action research groups.

When defining their understanding of reflective practice, the vast majority of practitioners responded by articulating how they used and applied the reflective process as distinct from how they understood the concept. Understanding and use of reflective practice was therefore described interchangeably by practitioners making it difficult to

identify any discernible theoretical basis or distinctive characteristics underpinning the process in use. The following interview extracts<sup>1</sup> provide an overview of how practitioners responded to the question relating to their conceptual understanding of reflective practice:

***“Well, that you get an opportunity to see what you are doing and why you are doing it.” (Pt.13)***

***“I see it as something you are constantly reviewing, constantly reviewing the quality of your work...” (Pt.7)***

***“I suppose I see it as reflecting back on your cases - how you managed them and how you dealt with families...” (Pt.18)***

In defining their understanding of reflective practice practitioners did not articulate any detailed technical knowledge or theoretical understanding of the concept. There was no evidence of any practitioner using a reflective model, a reflective journal, or a specific reflective structure. In addition, there was no evidence of any universal conceptual understanding in relation to how practitioners perceived reflective practice, or in relation to the context or issue where the reflective approach was applied.

The majority of practitioners in follow-up interviews commented that they had learned more about reflective practice since the initial interviews. This enhanced understanding positively influenced practitioners to actively seek out structures within their organisations that would support their use of reflective practice.

***“I’ve definitely got more of an awareness around using it and to look at more of the structures within our organisation that support that - I would say that I have learned an awful lot more about my own awareness in it.” (Pt.7)***

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation Pt at the end of an interview extract denotes ‘practitioner’.

There was a further recognition in follow-up interviews that some practitioners had developed a more informed awareness around the benefits of using reflective models as a structural support also to assist them while engaging in the reflective process:

*“I like that it did give a structure to the process on reflective practice, it definitely gave you that, a step-by-step approach to doing it. I just thought that for me it was specific to maybe more crisis situations and more situations that I couldn't get my head around maybe, and that gave me the process to do that. So it certainly was beneficial for that. I suppose then the other side is, the other model then I would have used would have been more planning forward and I think that was more kind of what I needed since then...” (Pt.4)*

Similarly, some practitioners commented that they were more conceptually aware of the theoretical dimension of reflective practice:

*“It has, in the sense that obviously I would know more about the theoretical side of reflective practice especially with the work that you are doing and being involved in this project. I would definitely be more aware of it but sometimes it is a little frustrating how to incorporate it fully knowing it would be of great benefit to the service.” (Pt.15)*

*“...I think it's really important that you have to critically review where you are coming from in approaching an issue and to apply your theory and to see if it's the best way forward and to, you know, if you are constantly making the same mistakes or approaching stuff the same way and it's not being effective, you need to really look and see is the problem with your method or is it with the way you are and the way you are looking at a situation or bringing your own reviews or your own feelings about an issue.” (Pt.10)*

Practitioners also demonstrated an enhanced understanding of the need for analysis and thoroughness which is inherent in the application of a structured model of reflective practice. It was evident in follow-up interviews that practitioners became more aware of the reflective methodology that informed and in some instances challenged their existing practice:

*“...with the Johns model it’s very much very analytical of the actual situation you find yourself in, which is excellent. (Pt.9)*

*“Well I suppose using the Johns model has prompted me to be - I suppose - to be more challenged about things you know - it’s very thorough - do you know what I mean?” (Pt.13)*

For a minority of practitioners, their level of conceptual understanding of reflective practice had not changed since the initial interview. This absence of change was apparent in several ways. Firstly, practitioners simply responded that their understanding had not changed:

*“I don’t think so. I don’t think it has. Maybe because of my age or something. I think I would have automatically always done it. What I am much clearer than before is I am more accepting than with reflective practice; there is not an awful lot I can do about it.” (Pt.5)*

*“No, I don’t think so. I mean it’s still the same, I mean you’re writing case notes, you’re reflecting on what you’ve just done, we’re using it in supervision and with peers. I don’t think it’s any different than last year.” (Pt.17)*

Another practitioner remarked that she would not be particularly conscious that she was engaging in the conceptual process of reflective practice. This practitioner presented as unclear in relation to what was being termed ‘reflective practice’ in the context of her own use of the process:

*“Not really conscious that it is happening.. I suppose if I was using it in an assessment for instance, I would look at that again for another assessment and say - well, that worked well - it might be an exercise that I used to help them give me the information and if that worked well I would use it again. I don’t know if you would call it reflective practice.” (Pt.19)*

In answering the same question of self-reported change in understanding the concept of reflective practice, some practitioners continued to respond by describing how they used the reflective process as opposed to how they perceived or understood the concept. This

response, it could be argued, suggests a continued lack of conceptual understanding regarding the reflective process involved:

***“Reflective practice, I think for me is about looking at, you know, something that had happened and that you may be happy or unhappy with and breaking it down to see why we think it happened this way, you know, or why do we think these emotions are evoked and learning from that, do you know, that kind of would be the way I’d kind of sum it up.”(Pt.11)***

While the overwhelming majority of practitioners indicated in their initial response that they had an understanding of reflective practice, two practitioners did, however, report that they were unfamiliar with the concept of reflective practice:

***“Okay, well I don’t really know an awful lot about it, to be honest with you. My understanding of it is that in my work involving reflective practice with younger children would be if they’re talking to me, kind of repeating back to them what they have said on a one-to-one basis so that they know that I’m listening to them and know what they’re saying.”(Pt.1)***

***“I don’t think I ever heard of reflective practice when I was in college or in post-grad. The first time I really became aware of it was when I did a supervisory course through... for supervising students and a big part of that module was reflective practice. I might have heard of it before, but I don’t remember.” (Pt.4)***

As illustrated by the quotation below, reported in the context of a follow-up interview, this practitioner now acknowledges that she/he now understands the concept of reflective practice and is able to link the process specifically to the evaluation of work while also being aware of the different factors that can impact on practitioners when working and engaging with families.

***“I understand it now, but - I think it's the process of evaluating your work taking into account external factors and internal factors, I don't know, a question of what's working for a family and why you acted in a certain way.”(Pt.1)***

The second quotation below illustrates how this practitioner now links the use of

reflective practice with emotions, thought processes and achieving better outcomes by reflecting on what could have been done better.

*“What is my understanding - well again, I suppose, looking back on what may have occurred with - or what may happen - seeing how you, maybe your emotions, your thought process on it, had better effected the outcome of it. What you could have done differently, what went well, maybe trying to get somebody else's perspective on it to see, you know, what they - how they would have seen the event. What else - yeah, just looking back on what could have been done better and what did you actually do.”(Pt.4)*

#### ***4.1 Contrasting the action research group's understanding of reflective practice with the non-action research group's***

In comparing the levels of understanding evident between practitioners from the action research and non-action research groupings at follow-up interviews some discernible differences are apparent. For example, as the quotations below illustrate, practitioners from the action research group exhibit a level of understanding regarding their use of the reflective process that links the approach to achieving heightened professional awareness regarding potential ‘triggers’ or issues that evoke in them an emotional reaction while working with families. Similarly, practitioners from the non-action research group describe their use of reflective practice to mull over and contemplate on positive and negative aspects of their practice and using reflective process to learn from both:

*“It just, it creates an awareness. It informs you more of issues, like the bigger issues that might trigger you, that's another - push your buttons or makes you reflect more, you know, develop a deeper sense of self-awareness as to why certain issues - certain families might trigger things in you, yeah.” (Pt.5)*

*“For me I think it's about looking back at what you have done and trying to learn something from it. That's putting it very simply, but on the good things and the bad things and I think what I got out of this was looking back at what went well as much as what went wrong. Now up until now I think you'd reflect like that if you had an aggressive client or a difficult client or someone who complains or whatever - whereas*

*some of the stuff I wrote in the journal was actually stuff that had gone well - which was new to me” (Pt.16)*

Some practitioners exhibited an understanding and awareness of critical reflection associated with the critical theory tradition that was not evident during baseline interviews.

*“...the ways you can reflect and what you can reflect on, it’s really expanded in terms of, you know, I would never have thought of let’s say looking at the broader issues, you know, the whole conscience of society or, you know, that whole deeper level has definitely improved.” (Pt.9)*

From a conceptual perspective, the essence of effective reflective practice can involve critical self-appraisal and exploring practice opportunities for learning and improved professional development. Practitioners in the action research grouping appeared to have a better understanding of this reflective component and approach and how it can positively influence their practice:

*“For me it comes back to the opportunity to look at how I have handled particular cases. To break it down to - could I have done it better? What could I have done better? Reflection to me is looking at what I have done.”(Pt.5)*

*“I think it’s to use - for me it was to use an experience in my professional work by - that I might have found particularly challenging and to look and work through a way of reflecting on it and producing better outcomes for the family and also learning for myself how to handle those sort of situations better in the future.” (Pt.7)*

Participants from the action research group presented as more insightful and knowledgeable in relation to the process involved in the application of reflective practice. This enhanced knowledge is particularly evident in relation to the application of the Johns model of structured reflection. Moreover, being part of a collegial grouping working together to apply the reflective approach may have assisted practitioners in developing a more sophisticated understanding and application of the reflective methodology. This is exemplified in the quotation below regarding the development of

what this practitioner describes as the development of mindfulness and moving into a more objective place:

***“Yes. I suppose I found in the Johns model, one of the first things on it was to become mindful. I would put a lot of attention to that anyway developing mindfulness in my everyday life and that would translate into my work. I think for me to make reflective practice constructive, in some way I need to come into that place of being mindful into my centre point so that I can access nearly like my weakness consciousness so that I can move into a kind of an objective place rather than a subjective place.” (Pt .12)***

Action research participants also displayed a greater commitment to using reflective journals as part of the research study. In the process of using these reflective journals as part of the research study some practitioners gained a better and more informed understanding in relation to the use of a reflective journal as a technical aid to facilitate and support their use of reflective practice overall. In some instances action research participants used their reflective journal in conjunction with the Johns model of structured reflection. This use of the reflective journals again provided practitioners with more insight and a more informed understanding regarding the nature of journaling.

***“Well I suppose with the journal I would have started my entries with the journal using the model... I found it a very free flowing and logical method of reflection, you know, it was very difficult, some of the questions. It just went that bit further for me, let’s say than Gibbs.”(Pt.9)***

There was a notable difference between participants of the action research and non-action research groups in relation to the importance of having appropriate structures to promote and support the use of reflective practice. A number of participants from the action research group in particular commented on the advantages of using structure, similar to the action research structure, to support and develop the use of reflective practice. The identification of structure was not raised as an issue by any participant in the non-action research group. The idea of structure being an important aspect of reflective practice is illustrated in the following interview extracts from action research participants:

*“I think it is having that bit more structure, that instead of thinking about what just happened, you are actually sitting down thinking what led to that, what happened, what do I feel about it.” (Pt.16)*

*I feel I do reflect a lot, but I still feel we need a more kind of universal structure to do it under. So that we're all using the same thing and we're all sort of working toward the same sort of outcomes.(Pt.7)*

#### ***4.2 Contrasting the managers' understanding of reflective practice with the practitioners'***

There was a marked difference between practitioners and managers<sup>2</sup> in relation to how these groups defined the concept of reflective practice. For example, some managers linked reflective practice to professional values and defined its use in terms of practice principles:

*“I suppose for me it is a model about sitting back and thinking about a number of elements. One would be, why you work in the way you work? What influences the way you work, as in your own personal values, your work values, principles and practices and I guess your experience and wondering how you come to decisions and what leads you up to decisions and trying to clarify that.” (Mgr.4)*

In linking their conceptual understanding of reflective practice to professional values and practice principles, managers demonstrated a deeper awareness regarding the important influence that reflective practice can have in ensuring that social work and family support service interventions are grounded in, and informed by, a specific value base. For example, this related to working in partnership with families, listening to families, endeavouring to empower families and working from a strengths-based perspective. This is a core area underpinning the social work and family support task. It also represents a significant acknowledgement by managers regarding the potentially pivotal function of reflective practice.

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviation Mgr at the end of an interview extract denotes 'manager'.

Another example that illustrates how managers exhibited a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the reflective methodology relates to self-awareness. Some managers expressed the view that reflective practice was a mechanism to heighten professional self-awareness around issues such as personal prejudices, values, and a consciousness regarding how professionals can impact on families from the perspective of anti-discriminatory practice. Reflective practice was considered an optic through which practice and interventions with service users could be evaluated and reviewed. This level of understanding regarding reflective practice links the process to the important area of anti-discriminatory practice:

***“In many ways it is almost a literal understanding. It is about reflecting, it is about stopping and being aware of yourself, your beliefs, your prejudices, your values and what you bring to the relationship and to the meeting. Also an awareness of the people you are meeting and what is influencing them. It is a combination of your values and of your knowledge, of your experience and how you are using it.” (Mgr.7)***

Some managers also defined the importance of reflective practice in the context of bringing about change in relation to working with families:

***“I think it is probably key. I feel it is more important now than I would have ever felt all through my professional life. The key to change, while it is in relationship and it can be in techniques, in models, it has to be also backed up by reflection. Are we doing the right thing? Are we doing it in the right way?” (Mgr.1)***

Managers presented their perceptions and use of the reflective process in a more articulate and sophisticated way. For example, in the quotation below a manager links the use and importance of using reflective practice to the area of relationship-based practice, recognising power differentials in working relationships and the potential to get it wrong if you do not engage in reflective practice:

***“Because of the nature of our job, and because we have to form relationships and work with families, with parents and with children, with the variety of people in the family and with other professionals. Just the expectations of us to kind of solve***

*situations and make them better. There is a lot of pressure. These relationships are really important. If you don't stop and you are not aware of yourself, the type of person you are. If you are not aware of the power imbalance to these relationships and how people respond to you and how you respond to situations, you can get it really wrong. That can have very serious implications for the family and for the children you are working with. If you are pressing ahead and the groundwork is all wrong over something very simple that you are not aware of yourself. In one way it is easy to say or be aware that you have these relationships. Some people are not very open to hearing that they might actually have some prejudices or some characteristic.” (Mgr.6)*

The overwhelming majority of managers were positive about the influence of reflective practice in shaping interventions and developing and effecting positive change with families. However, it should be noted that managers were, similar to the majority of practitioners, unclear and unspecific about any systemic or structured use of reflective practice. This was evident in that managers made no reference to utilising any reflective model in the context of formal supervision with practitioners. More significantly perhaps is the infrequency of use and the limited extent with which managers actually utilise reflective practice. This issue will be further addressed in the next section of this chapter and illustrated further in Chapter Four regarding reported barriers to the use of reflective practice.

### ***4.3 Findings on the use of reflective practice***

This section will focus on the presentation of findings on the reported application of reflective practice by practitioners and managers, using baseline and follow-up interviews. A particular emphasis in this section will be placed on illuminating what reflective practice looks like in its practical application, and the situations and circumstances in which practitioners and managers apply reflective practice. Comparative findings between action research and non-action research groups in relation to the use of reflective practice will also be presented.

As stated, findings from baseline interviews show no evidence that practitioners use any conceptually distinct methodology or uniform approach when employing reflective

practice. There is also no evidence of any specific practice arena in which reflective practice is used. Practitioners described their use of reflective practice on three levels. For example, some practitioners state that they use reflective practice to focus on what they describe as 'work'. Alternatively, other practitioners state that they incorporate reflection to review their 'practice' in a reflective way. Finally, other practitioners refer to a process of 'looking back' to describe their use of reflective practice. All practitioner accounts describe their use of reflective practice in general and non-specific terms with no reference to using reflective models or the use of reflective structures. It can reasonably be inferred that practitioners who described their use of reflective practice in terms of 'work' and 'practice' were essentially describing the same general areas. Use of the terminology 'looking back' suggests a more action oriented dimension and level of reflective overview in use. This finding highlights that practitioners employ the reflective methodology in different ways and place reflective emphasis on different areas. Reinforcing this point, the quotations below illustrate this diversity of reflective application by including reference to using the process to consider 'internal' and 'external factors', bringing about 'change' and exploring 'feelings'.

*“I think it’s the process of evaluating your “work” taking into account external factors and internal factors, I don’t know, a question of what’s working for a family and why you acted in a certain way.” (Pt.1)*

*“Well to me reflective practice is a skill that lets you look at your “practice”, evaluate it, thrash it out and then go on to change future actions or hypothesis with different ways of doing things, and then following on from that.” (Pt.6)*

*“I suppose it’s “looking back” on what actions you took interviewing someone, maybe thinking about it, looking at your feelings about it, looking at what you could have done better, looking at, I suppose, your actions and your feelings and your thoughts around the whole interview.”(Pt 19)*

In follow-up interviews the overwhelming majority of practitioners presented as being more engaged in their use of reflective practice. Practitioners who were involved in the action research group, for example, presented as having a more pro-active engagement

with using the Johns model of structured reflection, using reflective journals and participating in the action research process itself.

*“Well I suppose what I found useful was that when you reflect in your head you can avoid or miss out on some things or not think about certain aspects - but when you have a particular structure there and to actually write something - you really have to think about it and what you’re writing and then you’re able to look back on it - you know in a few weeks’ time or whatever - even day to day things change - you perceive things - yea, very useful.” (Pt.13 Action Research Participant)*

*“...with the Johns model it’s very much very analytical of the actual situation you find yourself in which is excellent.” (Pt.9 Action Research Participant )*

It should be noted that while the majority of non-action research participants did not use either the Johns model of structured reflection or reflective journals, they did nonetheless present as being more engaged in their use of reflective practice in follow-up interviews:

*“I suppose in any of them, you know, there’s so much to be learned from looking back on what you did already and seeing ways to improve it, and also to see what you did well with it, you know, that is equally important. But well then we have to - we are constantly reflecting on what we’ve seen, or what we’ve done in order to kind of give us the material we need to kind of go forward with work with families, or work with anybody really”. (Pt.4. Non-Action Research Participant )*

*“I suppose I would do a lot of reflection through maybe team meetings with my colleagues especially after going on a home visit or, if there is kids in, we would chat about it straight afterwards”. (Pt.20: Non-Action Research Participant)*

A minority of practitioners exhibited relatively little change in relation to their use of reflective practice. These practitioners continued to describe their practical application of reflective practice through the use of general and non-specific terminology. For example, similar to baseline responses some practitioners made references to evaluating their “work”, and “looking back” at work to describe their use of the reflective process.

There continued to be a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the process being used and in relation to the outcome of this process.

*“I think it's the process of evaluating your work taking into account external factors and internal factors, I don't know, a question of what's working for a family and why you acted in a certain way.” (Pt.1)*

#### **4.4 Reflective practice and self-awareness – practitioners' views**

In baseline interviews practitioners identified links with their use of reflective practice in relation to their own sense of self-awareness regarding different aspects of the social care task. For example, practitioners acknowledged the emotional intensity and personal challenges that can face social care practitioners in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities, and the importance of self-reflection regarding their emotional boundaries and emotional potential triggers in themselves.

*“So it was actually getting to know your triggers, what makes you tick, anything like that. If you're uncomfortable with something, then why are you? That sort of thing. So it would constantly challenge you in that sense to look at yourself... I think it's about breaking down your own practice and getting to know yourself first of all. I suppose one of the biggest things is knowing your comfort zones of what you're okay with, knowing your strengths, knowing your weakness's and knowing your own boundaries and stuff.” (Pt.14)*

*“...it's where you give yourself time to actually reflect on the work you are doing, what are your feelings about it, what are your thoughts about things and bringing it all together so you can actually work out what is the best way for moving forward. I suppose it's also, for a worker, what they're bringing to it and also what are the issues in the case? Is the worker being triggered by anything in that or anything that may have worked in another case that they could use again or that might be influencing the case”. (Pt.12)*

In the following quotation a practitioner identifies the importance of the reflective approach in terms of being self-aware regarding how practitioners approach their work and duties. In this example, the practitioner describes being aware of his/her manner of

working, the strategies he/she uses and how his/her approach can impact and influence families he/she works with:

*“It’s reflecting your own self-awareness, your own approaches, your own manner of working and also continuously affecting the strategies that you are using, reflecting to see if everyone is on board. It’s a constant self-awareness and reflection on your work and how it’s influencing the family that you’re working with.”(Pt.11)*

In follow-up interviews some practitioners acknowledged, without prompting, the importance of them using reflective practice as a mechanism to enable enhanced professional self-awareness. Practitioners made reference to various practice scenarios where, through their use of reflective practice, they were able to overcome their own potential bias and prejudice in dealing with particular service users:

*“In one of my cases I had to consider whether issues I had with the father about his previous behaviour, he was in an underage relationship, was impacting on the way that I was dealing with him. I had to reflect on that and acknowledge he is a good father now regardless of what he has done in the past and maybe change my attitude towards him. I was more open towards him. I definitely see reflecting on things like that and your attitude towards people and maybe I suppose sometimes how you can put barriers up to people and the judgments you make and at times it is not fair.” (Pt.18)*

Practitioners also acknowledged the importance of reflective practice and links to enhanced self-awareness in recognising the potential, particularly when they are busy and interventions don’t work, to apportion blame on families when things go wrong instead of evaluating their own role and contribution to the situation:

*“I think sometimes, particularly when you are busy and things come in and don’t go so well - you can sometimes have the tendency to blame the family - you know - you would say that is someone just being awkward or somebody being difficult - sometimes you don’t necessarily take the time to say - did I do something? - okay I didn’t cause it - maybe I didn’t help it.” (Pt.16)*

Practitioners further identified an important role in their use of reflective practice to raise self-awareness, particularly regarding them being alert and recognizing their own role and contribution, to collegial conflict and blaming when something negative unfolds.

*“It would I suppose and it gets you to - instead sometimes with other people, people may have a tendency to blame the person or to look at maybe the negative of what happened. Maybe you need to step back and reflect on it, maybe look at maybe what you were feeling about it on that day - how was your own behaviour, how did you influence the situation. So, at least you can add that kind of awareness about yourself and then you can maybe look at the dynamics between the other people. But it gives you a chance to look at your own - what you, how you influenced the situation, or how you influenced if there was any conflict - and try to eliminate those before you can change the whole scenario” (Pt.4)*

*“Well yeah, you know, let’s say that like in the..... team like I work with a variety of other professionals and if you have an issue with them, do you feel that they have dumped something on your plate or you’ve referred something to them and they are not dealing with it or whatever, that maybe reflective practice will help you kind of look at how did I approach it or have I approached it with them, you know, and maybe I need to go to that person and reflective practice might give me the tools how to approach that person.” ( Pt.3)*

#### ***4.5 Reflective practice and learning – practitioners’ views***

Practitioners expressed the view in baseline interviews that reflective practice was used by them as a learning mechanism and process to aid professional development. Specifically, practitioners commented that they employed reflective practice when examining and reviewing their practice or a work related scenario. Practice learning was then gleaned from these experiences and subsequently used to inform future interventions and methods of working. Practitioners identified and linked their use of reflective practice with experiential learning and in terms of evaluating what worked for families and this reflective process influencing and changing future practice:

*“Well, I think that you're learning through experiences - you're reflecting, you're learning through experiences. For me, if you - I think yeah, looking back on what's*

*working and not working then when you work with the next family you might be able to make changes.”( Pt.1)*

Some practitioners were more explicit regarding the learning potential inherent in their use of reflective practice and linking their use of the reflective process to the subsequent application of theory to practice and gaining a deeper understanding of positive and negative aspects of practice through the use of reflective practice:

*“It’s not just sitting down and realising what you have done, it’s about understanding the work we do at a deeper level, looking at the theory that underpins the work we do. And also looking at the skills within yourself that help you to be a good reflective practitioner. I know that reflective practice isn’t by chance, reflective practice is a conscious activity.(Pt.9)*

In follow-up interviews practitioners again reiterated the view that they considered reflective practice a vehicle for learning. Practitioners commented that reflecting on a previous intervention provided an opportunity to learn and improve:

*“I suppose in any of them, you know, there’s so much to be learned from looking back on what you did already and seeing ways to improve it, and also to see what you did well with it, you know, that is equally important. But well, then we have to - we are constantly reflecting on what we’ve seen, or what we’ve done in order to kind of give us the material we need to kind of go forward with work with families, or work with anybody really. ”(Pt.11)*

*“For me I think it’s about looking back at what you have done and trying to learn something from it. That’s putting it very simply, but on the good things and the bad things and I think what I got out of this was looking back at what went well as much as what went wrong.” (Pt.16)*

#### **4.6 Complex cases - follow-up Interviews**

A marked change was evident in follow-up interviews in relation to the reported use of reflective practice by practitioners in their dealing with more complex cases and situations. This was particularly evident with practitioners who participated in the action research group. Practitioners were more open in describing their use of reflective

practice to deal with cases of neglect, removing children into care and dealing with disgruntled parents. Some practitioners also referred to their use of reflective practice in cases where they felt 'stuck':

*“Yeah because there’s always difficult cases, you know, and you might feel, God how am I going to go into this family, it’s a horrible thing now to them, you know, it could be an issue of maybe neglect or abuse or whatever it is and you are thinking how do you bring that up with them, do you know, and how do you say it in such a way that, you know, they don’t stop you coming to their house?”(Pt.3)*

*“It probably would, yeah. It would in that sense, it definitely helps with a few different, I suppose, things that I might have been stuck on, because I could apply it to that, do you know what I mean. Instead of, as I said, sometimes you can go round and round a little bit, but this was more geared towards, OK well let's break this down and how to move it on, kind of thing.” (Pt.14)*

*“I don’t think you could progress working in this kind of job - child protection - with heavy stuff - with serious issues in families - if you weren’t thinking about the way you’re approaching a family and the way that it’s going to work - it’s always going to be different - our work is so varied. Families are so varied - families can be so stressed and tense you need to constantly reflect on what you’ve done and change the way you approach and the way you manage a family - you have to keep changing.” (Pt.17)*

Practitioners report using reflective practice to assist them when making difficult case decisions that can have major implications for families and children. This point is illustrated in the following interview extract:

*“At times decisions I have made I would reflect a lot. For example, the decision regarding a child would I apply for a full care order or not? I find times like that, I would think about things and reflect a lot. As I said, outside of work even to make sure that you are making the right call on it.”(Pt.18)*

Practitioners commented also that they use reflective practice to assist them unpack and analyse case scenarios. This point is illustrated in the following interview extract where a practitioner uses reflection to comprehend why a foster placement was unsuccessful:

*“Sometimes with families, when I am doing my support work with the foster families, when you have to look over a situation, for example, a breakdown. You have to really look at what went wrong there. What were the factors that contributed to the breakdown and you do a bit of it that way.”(Pt.19)*

Some practitioners described using reflective practice as a method to critique aspects of their practice. Using this approach reportedly resulted in the realization that their interventions were either not working or ineffective. Using the reflective process can support practitioners in arriving at the decision that their intervention is ineffective and that they can do no more. This application of reflective practice highlights the links between the use of reflective practice and practitioners using the process to alter the nature or design of their intervention with a family. Alternatively, the reflective process is used to evaluate that a particular intervention is not working and that consideration needs to be given to an alternative approach being employed.

*“You see the thing is, I suppose, the thing about when you are engaging in reflective practice it doesn't mean that you're always going to be successful, so I suppose it's - you can equally come to the conclusion that nothing is working here, so I need maybe to move on. And that can be your outcome as well with your reflection, do you know. So I suppose it's not a case of measuring it in success, kind of relations either, it's all about, I suppose, what outcome you can bring yourself to”. (Pt.14)*

*“Well to me reflective practice is a skill that lets you look at your practice, evaluate it, thrash it out and then go on to change future actions or hypothesis with different ways of doing things, and then following on from that.” (Pt.6)*

*“To me, it would be about taking time to look back on something you have done, looked at what worked, what didn't and what you could have done differently and what you might do differently next time.” (Pt.16)*

#### ***4.7 Reflective practice and influencing future practice – practitioners' views***

In describing their use of the reflective process, practitioners made reference to how engaging in reflective practice assisted them to be more consciously aware of their day-to-day practice and what had worked well for them while learning from this reflection. In addition, using reflection and contemplating on the specific models of practice they employed in their daily practice also assisted in the learning process and aided their endeavours to improve their practice. The quotations below illustrate the theme of potential learning inherent in using a reflective approach. Both quotations exemplify a conscious willingness to reflect and learn.

*“It’s about making time to consciously and actively take time out to be self-critical, self-praising. I think a lot of the time with reflective practice that we often look at what did we do wrong and often we don’t look at what did I do well there? And to learn from that and to build that into future work.” (Pt.9)*

*“Reflective practice to me is, being conscious of how I work if there are models that I use, and being conscious while I’m working what kind of model I’m using, if I’m using a model and, post the work, thinking about what I have done and how maybe I could improve.”(Pt.5)*

#### ***4.8 The use of reflective practice – contrasting the views of the action and non-action groups***

In comparing action research and non-action research practitioners there was a discernible difference apparent in links made between the use of reflective practice and achieving better outcomes. In interview transcripts, inferences about and links with the use of reflective practice and achieving better outcomes were not made by any of the non-action research participants. This point is illustrated in the following interview extracts with two action research participants:

*“OK. I suppose reflective practice for me is - I tend to reflect all action on the action. It is kind of - looking at an intervention, or a piece of work you've done with a family and questioning yourself on it. What I could have done better, what outcomes I have achieved, that's about it .” (Pt.6)*

*“I think it's to use - for me it was to use an experience in my professional work by - that I might have found particularly challenging and to look and work through a way of reflecting on it and producing better outcomes for the family and also learning for myself how to handle those sort of situations better in the future.”(Pt.7)*

In follow-up interviews there was evidence that practitioners within the action research group had developed a heightened awareness in relation to the use of reflective practice to consider more deep seated societal issues. Five out of the ten action research participants indicate, through comments made, that they had developed a more informed level of understanding as a result of being associated with the action research group. This point is illustrated in the following interview extracts:

*“...looking at the barriers to reflection and the ways you can reflect and what you can reflect on, it's really expanded in terms of, you know, I would never have thought of, let's say, looking at the broader issues, you know, the whole consciousness of society or, you know, that whole deeper level has definitely improved.” (Pt.9)*

*“It has and I would have, I suppose, looked at that through the journaling and the action research group. I remember mentioning prior to one of the action research groups that poverty had come up as something that I hadn't seen ever, really, and I worked in homeless services, but somebody not having eaten for maybe three or four days beforehand, because they actually didn't have any money...so I definitely feel for each injustice there needs to be this threshold...” (Pt.14)*

#### ***4.9 The use of reflective practice - contrasting the views of the practitioners and the managers.***

In comparing the perspective of managers in relation to how they use reflective practice with the views expressed by practitioners a number of similarities and contradictions emerge. Firstly, at a conceptual level managers, similar to practitioners, were overwhelmingly positive about the influence of using reflective practice. Managers espoused the perceived value associated with using reflective practice for example; improved practice, the problem-solving qualities of using reflection and the benefits of using reflective practice to enhance practice skills and knowledge:

*“To me, I’m only talking for myself now in that when you, in your work, just like in life in general, you try to reflect on the work that you’ve done in order to either improve it, to find new solutions, to find better ways of doing things. To make, in my own role, trying to make staff reflect on their own work situation and...” (Mgr.10)*

*“I think it is an essential tool to use in relation to this work. I think the problem with this work is that you can just go along each day doing the actions and really you have to have the time to step back and think about what you are doing, what you are trying to achieve and what is happening with this family. Without those questions, we really aren’t going to be progressing our practice.” (Mgr.2)*

Managers also expressed the view that using reflective practice at an individual level enabled them to participate in the reflective process with practitioners, in the context of formal supervision. This involved teasing out the positives and negatives with a practitioner in relation to a case in order to achieve collective learning from the experience.

*“I think it is encouraging them to do it. It is reflecting with them. Sometimes it is drawing out having that conversation. It is picking a case and drawing out on that. Like I said, what worked well, what didn’t work well. It is allowing them that space within supervision to do that.” (Mgr.6)*

Managers expressed the view that, as supervisors, they need to have an awareness regarding the importance associated with the use of reflection and for practitioners to engage in reflective practice. Managers in this context, see their role as ensuring time is allocated to the reflective process and to ensure practitioners adopt a self-questioning and reflective approach.

*“Certainly I would be much more aware, as the supervisor, to be reflective and to encourage staff to be reflective. You can too easily get caught on - right, I have got this much time and I need to get through all these cases. The importance of helping staff to reflect and ask the questions. As I said, I am much more conscious of that when I am the supervisor.” (Mg.7)*

While managers extol the positive values of using and promoting reflective practice, inconsistencies in relation to their use of the process can be identified in the experience of practitioners who they supervise. For example, a number of practitioners were vocal in asserting the absence of reflective practice in the context of their individual supervision and the perceived lack of support in promoting reflective practice from a management and organisational perspective.

*“Well, I mean it is on the agenda. It’s there, it should take place in supervision and everyone agrees it should, but the reality is just sometimes a bit different.” (Pt.16)*

*“Where I see room for improvement is how we’re guided in our reflective practices and the emphasis that is put on it, at present. To be fair I think it is kind of tokenistic. I mean, I look for it to be implemented in our service, I think there is room for some kind of formal training for all of us, as well as our line managers, to have a bit more of an understanding and to be able to guide us as practitioners using it correctly.”(Pt.6)*

This issue will be addressed more extensively in Chapter Five when I will set out the reported barriers that can inhibit the use of reflective practice.

## ***Summary***

Research participants displayed differences in their understanding of both the concept and processes of reflective practice throughout this study. Baseline interviews showed that the majority of practitioners expressed their conceptual understanding of reflective practice using imprecise and often unclear terms. There was little evidence of any technical understanding of the processes of reflective practice amongst practitioners. The majority of practitioners, when asked to define their understanding of the reflective approach responded by describing how they use reflective practice making it difficult to establish levels of conceptual understanding. In follow-up interviews one year later, there was evidence that practitioners who participated in the action research process had developed an enhanced understanding of reflective practice. This was evident in relation to practitioners exhibiting a better conceptual understanding and awareness of the reflective methodology; practitioners displaying a better practical awareness and

understanding of, for example, the Johns model of structured reflection and the use of reflective journals. There was evidence that practitioners in this group were more articulate in describing the reflective process.

There was evidence also of some enhanced understanding among participants in the non-action research group. However, the level and extent of this change was less apparent. Two participants from this group reported that their understanding and use of reflective practice had not changed at all during the period of research.

Managers involved in this study displayed a deeper understanding of the concept of reflective practice in comparison to participating practitioners in the study. Managers linked their understanding of reflective practice to values and practice principles in the sphere of work. They also viewed the reflective process as a mechanism in which to ground social care practice in the context of a core set of values.

During baseline interviews, practitioners described their application of reflective practice in varied and unspecific ways. There was little evidence of any conceptually distinct models or approaches being used by practitioners. There was equally little evidence of any universal application of reflective practice being used in any specific practice setting. However, in subsequent follow-up interviews there was evidence that practitioners were using reflective practice in more focused and specific ways. In follow-up interviews practitioners were able to link their use of reflective practice with enhanced self-awareness, particularly when dealing with highly charged emotional scenarios, or in situations of collegial conflict. Practitioners also reported using reflective practice as a method to avoid blaming families when interventions are ineffective. During these follow-up interviews, practitioners also cited the importance of using reflective practice as a mechanism for professional growth, improvement in practice, and aiding the process of working with complex cases.

## **Chapter Five: Findings**

### ***Introduction***

In Chapter Five findings will be presented in relation to three main areas of the research study. Firstly, findings will be presented in relation to the reported benefits that result from the use of reflective practice. This will be followed by a presentation of findings regarding the reported enabling factors that facilitate and promote the use of reflective practice. Finally, in this chapter I will present findings in relation to the reported barriers that may prohibit practitioners in their use of reflective practice. Similar to Chapter Three, these findings will be based on data gathered from baseline and follow-up interviews undertaken with practitioners. Findings will also be presented in relation to the above three areas regarding the action research and non-action research groups in the context of baseline and follow-up interviews. The perspective of managers who participated in the research study will also be included in each section of this chapter.

### ***5 The benefits of using reflective practice***

#### ***5.1 Reflective practice and learning***

The majority of practitioners who participated in baseline interviews expressed a positive view on the value of reflective practice referring to a variety of benefits which they contend result from their use of the reflective approach. One such benefit identified by practitioners relates to the learning potential inherent in the reflective process and the experiential learning or learning from specific practice scenarios that practitioners gain from using reflective practice. In turn, for some practitioners this was linked to heightened professional awareness and practice improvement:

*“...yea I definitely think so - a few of the cases that I would have reflected on was working with interpreters and things with families and how you build up relationships with people from other cultures, and definitely some of the cases I would have reflected on when I was first qualified and how I managed that definitely affected the families I worked with and how I managed that, and I think reflecting back as I said and your role and things and how that that does change your whole engagement, and*

*how they responded to you and how they look at the social work department, that you have to be very open and honest about what your role is..." (Pt.18)*

*"I suppose it would be about not getting really excited about an issue at first, it's about thinking about it. Or not to overreact to something that's happening in a case, whether it be good or bad, I suppose. But if something is going wrong or bad it's good to sit back and think about what is happening here and how we're all feeling or how I'm feeling, I suppose. Just try to keep a level head on things". (Pt.11)*

During the baseline interviews, practitioners reported that they considered reflective practice to be a beneficial process because using this approach prompted them to reflect and examine their work, and to learn what aspects of their work was effective when engaging with service users. One practitioner commented that engaging in reflective practice was beneficial because it prevented stagnation in her practice and improved the quality of working relationships with service users:

*"I would assume, and hope, that you would get better practice. Because, not only would you learn what worked well and what didn't, that would then sort of inform what you do the next time. Which has to work for the families, and you too because the job's not that easy." (Pt.16)*

*"Well I think it just makes me a better practitioner reflecting on the cases that I have dealt with and how I have managed them and how they can be improved and I also think that you don't become stagnant in your job and you're constantly thinking is there any way I can improve on it - and also for the clients it definitely improves the relationship that you have."(Pt.10)*

In follow-up interviews one year later, the majority of practitioners reiterated the 'learning' benefits which can result from the use of reflective practice. Similar to baseline responses, a number of practitioners linked their use of reflective practice to experiential learning or learning achieved from a particular experience or case scenario. Practitioners reported making a connection with this reflective learning process and better future practice:

*"Well, I think that you're learning through experiences - you're reflecting, you're learning through experiences. For me, if you - I think yeah, looking back on what's*

*working and not working, then when you work with the next family you might be able to make changes.”(Pt.1)*

*“Yeah. If you do reflect on what your intervention has been and whether or not it was successful or not, you can try something else if it hasn’t been successful and if it has been successful you can reflect on that you have been effective in helping or assisting. That is one positive.” (Pt.8)*

In follow-up interviews a number of practitioners expressed the view that engaging in reflective practice fostered a shared learning environment and engendered shared reflective learning between practitioners:

*“I think you kind of foster that kind of environment of learning really, where you can reflect on what you do and how you do it. A lot of the times I suppose in this field a lot of people are going through the same thing, or have similar experiences, so that kind of generates learning and shared learning from each other when you have that kind of environment.” (Pt.4)*

One practitioner commented that a benefit of using reflective practice was that it resulted in clarity on addressing the task in hand. This practitioner also felt that, ultimately, service users can benefit from practitioners who employ a reflective approach insofar as these practitioners learn, following reflection, from mistakes made and subsequently improve their practice as a result:

*“I think I benefit to start with in the sense of having a better understanding of what you are doing and trying to improve what you’re doing - but I think the clients do - if you have done something that maybe could be done better in the future - if you have reflected on that and learned something from it then the next family that comes through the door get a better service.” (Pt.16)*

## **5.2 Self-awareness and change**

Effecting positive changes in practice, particularly around individual self-awareness and attitude, was identified by practitioners, during baseline interviews, as being a specific benefit of using reflective practice. Practitioners described the benefits of using the reflective process in terms of how it could facilitate a change in their approach to

working with families and could also alter interventions or actions when working with families:

*“I think it just heightens your self-awareness. Why you have been triggered by something. Does it change my practice? Yeah, I’ll go back and I’ll change my tack, you know. Maybe it’s transferring, maybe it’s this, maybe it’s that, it changes your attitude where maybe you have personalised or have personal triggers and have taken something home or stuff like that. Then, through your reflective practice you think - actually why have I taken that perception of it? It helps you look into things, I suppose, more subjectively, and you go out there and maybe you’re in a better place to deal with a situation.” (Pt.6)*

In baseline interviews, practitioners acknowledged that working in the area of child care can present emotional challenges to them as professionals. Some practitioners commented that they could be shocked by unfolding disclosures in their work with families, for example, where there are allegations of child sexual abuse or physical abuse of children. These issues can trigger strong emotional feelings in practitioners such as anger, resentment or disgust at the harm inflicted on children. When dealing with intense emotional situations some practitioners described engaging in reflection a useful strategy to address such issues:

*“I think in this type of work I think you can get very emotive, do you know, and you can take things personally and, you know, I think when you use reflective practice it helps you stand back and think about things more objectively and I think it just, it gives you that format for it.” (Pt.11)*

*“Yeah, because I think people think that if you’ve been in this line of work for this many years then, yeah, you are grand because you’ve seen most things and there’s not a lot that will shock you after that, you know what I mean? But your boundaries are still going to be pushed all the time, you know what I mean? Some families will bring stuff up that you don’t like, but you’re working with them so you’ve got to find a way of dealing with that.” (Pt.14)*

During baseline interviews, other practitioners linked their use of reflective practice with the idea of practitioner flexibility and being open to change in how they intervene with

families through adopting new ways of engaging and working with families. This openness to change was acknowledged as being beneficial when trying to meet the different and changing needs of diverse service users:

***“Well I think, one, it benefits you because if you reflect on stuff - I’ve done a reasonable job or I found out something that I can do better - that helps you as a worker. I think families do benefit and I think they do because it means we are always willing to learn - we’re open to learn... how effective we are can be changed by reflective practice” (Pt.2)***

Practitioners highlighted the influence of reflective practice in the change process and in promoting alternative and/or different positive interventions with families. One practitioner noted how practitioners can at times expect families to reflect and change, and suggested that practitioners should also be open to this process:

***“If I don’t look at myself as trying to change or trying to improve, I can’t expect any more from anybody else that I’d work with, so the expectations that I’d have with families that we’re working with, I’d have to have the same expectations for myself.” (Pt.4)***

During follow-up interviews one practitioner framed the use of reflective practice in a context of getting families to also embrace the concept of reflection. This practitioner expressed the view that getting families to reflect could impact positively on the change process:

***“You know, and you're asking them to look at making changes and in order for them to make changes, they've got to be able to reflect. Do you know what I mean? So you're encouraging the people you work with to reflect. (Pt.14)***

In follow-up interviews the majority of research participants again expressed the view that engaging in reflective practice influenced how they worked with, and intervened with families and how this effected change in their approach. It was apparent from practitioner accounts that most practitioners reflected on the effectiveness of their work

with families and contemplated change where necessary as illustrated in the quotation below:

***“I can look back at my work with maybe a particular child or a particular family - what worked for them, what didn't work for them, was there anything that could have been done better. Is there anything that I need to change?” (Pt.1)***

Another practitioner also commented that she reflected on mistakes made during a previous involvement with a young person and challenged herself to change her approach and adopt new methods of engaging with service users, illustrating the change potential for practice inherent in using the reflective methodology:

***“The benefits I suppose would be that I'm not making the same mistakes twice over. I'm looking at the way I'm approaching it, challenging myself to go down a different route, maybe one I'm not comfortable with and see how that works.” (Pt.20)***

### ***5.3 Dealing with anxiety and stress***

In baseline interviews practitioners also acknowledged that their involvement and engagement with families can also have an immense emotional impact on service users. This is a similar but a different emotional challenge than the previous example where the emotional impact on self as practitioner was at issue. Families can experience fear, embarrassment and, sometimes, anger with child care staff and resent their involvement and presence in what can, sometimes, be perceived as unwanted interference in their lives. Practitioners could identify how using reflective practice can be useful in raising their own self-awareness regarding the emotional impact their engagement with families can have on these families and the stress and anxiety these families can experience.

***“I do not think you could progress working in this kind of job - child protection - with heavy stuff - with serious issues in families if you were not thinking about the way you're approaching a family and the way that it's going to work - it is always going to be different - our work is so varied. Families are so varied - families can be so stressed and tense, you need to constantly reflect on what you have done and change the way you approach and the way you manage a family - you have to keep changing.” (Pt.2)***

In follow-up interviews there was evidence of a consensus amongst practitioners that using reflective practice was beneficial when addressing issues of stress and anxiety in practice settings. Practitioners cited a number of different scenarios where they used reflective practice to deal with work-related stress. One practitioner expressed the view that using reflective practice helped her to deal with the pressures of having a heavy and stressful caseload and also to deal with particularly difficult cases. This practitioner commented that using reflective practice made her a better social worker as a result:

*“I think it is better practice and I definitely think it makes me a better social worker to do it. As I said, there has obviously been times when your caseload has you extremely stressed and anxious, particularly if you are dealing with difficult cases. I think if you can reflect on those cases it definitely helps to alleviate a lot of that pressure and stress.” (Pt.18)*

Another practitioner in a follow-up interview commented that working with families who are in crisis and feel under pressure can generate vicarious anxiety in practitioners. This practitioner expressed the view that using reflective practice was an approach she used to deal with such situations:

*“That is a huge part of it as regards how to deal with these constant anxious situations where people are aggrieved and under pressure and making poor decisions. It is very hard to do that. Reflective practice is a massive part of it.” (Pt.15)*

#### ***5.4 Reflective practice achieving better outcomes and enhanced practice***

During baseline interviews, some practitioners linked their use of reflective practice specifically with achieving better outcomes for families. The perceived dividends of using reflective practice included enhanced practice, better practitioner awareness, and more informed interventions leading to better outcomes for service users:

*“... because I think it leads to better outcomes for families, I think, if you’re more aware of how you’re working and what’s working and what’s not working then it*

***must lead to better outcomes for families. And it's taking into account as well what they say is working and not working.” (Pt.1)***

During the baseline, practitioners also pointed to the links between using reflective practice and the process of evaluating how they worked with, and intervened with families. Practitioners reported engaging in a process of self-reflection in relation to the effectiveness of their involvement with families and tailoring actions to achieve better outcomes:

***“I suppose it is just thinking back over your actions really and trying to have better outcomes for yourself and the family. I suppose family is the main thing, but just thinking about how you have intervened with families and what the outcomes of the interventions have been and have they been positive.” (Pt.8)***

In follow-up interviews some practitioners again identified the benefits of using reflective practice and linked using the reflective process with enhancement of their practice and achieving better outcomes for service users. Practitioners questioned themselves reflectively on what they were doing, and felt this process helped them clarify their role in achieving better outcomes:

***“The benefits are that it is ensuring that you are working towards having the best practice available so that you are giving the best service to families and that it is meaningful and beneficial to them and, by way of that, that you would be hopefully more likely to get more positive outcomes. That is where I would see that it is very, very beneficial. If I can question what I am doing and reflect on what I am doing and be clear about that, I do think that would be more likely to happen.” (Pt.10)***

***“I suppose for your families that they have positive outcomes and that you are actually helping them rather than just being there for the sake of it being your role.” (Pt.8)***

There was a consistent view expressed in baseline and follow-up interviews by practitioners that recognised the benefits of using reflective practice and resulting enhanced practice. This enhanced practice entailed the refinement of practice skill or the improved development of knowledge and understanding resulting from reflective

learning and the application of this learning to new situations. For some practitioners this better practice was simply linked to the use of reflection to evaluate and improve a piece of work they had completed and the enhancement of their skill set going forward or striving to improve the service provided and this being influenced by the use of reflection:

***“For me it is about seeing what I can do better, what I’m doing and thinking about, what I could have done better and how I could improve my skills.”(Pt.19 Baseline interview)***

***“Oh definitely, the main aim was always to be as best as you can for the families that you’re working with. We do this in giving them the best service in the most efficient way possible so that you’re not messing around all the time, and that you’re very aware of what can be done and what needs to be done and that they’re part of that whole process. Whereas, if I didn’t reflect on or learn from all the different incidents that I had, I don’t think I’d be as I, maybe, could be in the future than I am now.” (Pt.4 Baseline)***

One practitioner expressed the view that using reflective practice was beneficial because it opened up and created opportunities to use different skills and approaches and try out other ways of working and engaging with families:

***“I think it give you skills - it gives you new skills to practice - to try - it’s like having a cupboard with all your tools in it and sometimes you have to put new ones in and sometimes you have to throw them out because they’re a bit dodgy - sometimes they don’t work but you leave them in the back of the cupboard because they might work with another family - not everything works with everybody - so it’s about that.”(Pt.2 Baseline)***

A number of practitioners identified enhanced practice through linking their use of the reflective approach in terms of assessing how they engage with and question families:

***“I think you are looking at your own practice too and having a revaluation of your own practice and maybe it might help you to look at the way you question people or the way you do interviews.” (Pt.19 Follow-up interview)***

Other practitioners articulated the view that engaging in the reflective process was beneficial because it ensures practitioners were checking and evaluating the quality of their practice in order to improve and enhance their professional practice whilst engaging with service users.

*“The benefits are that it is ensuring that you are working towards having the best practice available so that you are giving the best service to families and that it is meaningful and beneficial to them... If I can question what I am doing and reflect on what I am doing and be clear about that, I do think that would be more likely to happen.” (Pt.10 Follow -up Interview)*

*“I think, for me as an individual, it is forcing me to try and slow down and look at the case in more detail before I even go out near the family. I would actually try and be a bit more reflective on the intake end of it.” (Pt.5 Follow-up interview)*

### ***5.5 Difference between action research and non-action research groupings***

The majority of practitioners in the action research and non-action research groupings reported a positive perception regarding reflective practice during both baseline and follow-up interviews. Practitioners from both groupings clearly identified a number of perceived benefits they reported resulted from their using reflective practice. The benefits outlined by these groupings included enhanced practice learning, positive changes to practice, support regarding work-related stress reduction, improved practice and better outcomes for families.

There was no discernible difference evident in findings between practitioners in either baseline or follow-up study. Practitioners from the action research and non-action research groupings were able to articulate a range of different benefits that result from their use of reflective practice using case examples and practice experience. This positive perception was consistently evident throughout baseline and follow-up interviews and between both action research and non-action research groupings.

## ***5.6 How did workers' views contrast with views of managers in relation to the benefits of using reflective practice***

Managers interviewed in this study expressed similarly positive sentiments to those articulated by practitioners in relation to the benefits that can accrue from the use of reflective practice and were supportive of staff engaging in the reflective process. From a management perspective, reflective practice was considered an important factor that can positively influence a number of specific areas of practice. Managers considered the use of reflective practice by practitioners as a beneficial influence in assisting practitioners to develop a better understanding of the social care task:

***“Well, hopefully the reflective practitioner gets a greater understanding both of his job and the issues, that’s one thing. That would also help hopefully to engage better with the family.” (Mgr.10)***

***“I think sometimes if a worker can be reflective they can be...I think there can be more meaning and more engagement maybe with the service user, if the worker takes that kind of tack.” (Mgr.5)***

Some managers expressed the view that, in using reflective practice, practitioners became more aware and tuned into the presenting issues facing families and the needs of service users. They expressed the view that families got a sense of this and that practitioners were sincere in trying to help and support them:

***“It (reflective practice) gives clients the sense that, one, they are being looked after and being helped but on another level, it gives them a sense that this person is genuinely interested in helping me, rather than generally interested in getting me to do what they tell me to do.” (Mgr.1)***

Managers, like practitioners, identified learning as being a key general benefit of using reflective practice. They acknowledged that social care practice is an evolving professional task for individual practitioners where learning and development is ongoing. They recognised that learning achieved through the use of reflective practice is then transferred to future case scenarios. This group of research participants also

identified the positive dimension relating to the use of reflective practice and bringing about changes to practice. This change process, similar to that identified by practitioners, was linked to professional development, identifying gaps in knowledge and skills and evolving better practice as a result of using reflection as a learning tool and process:

***“I think it is about developing people’s skills and developing people’s learning and looking at how you can do things differently. It is kind of teasing that out with somebody. I think it is very easy to kind of get into the kind of functionality or outcomes and not really exploring, I suppose, how did we get there?” (Mgr.5)***

### ***5.7 Enabling factors***

This section will focus on findings regarding the enabling factors which facilitate the use of reflective practice. In considering the data from this research study, practitioners describe several diverse processes and mechanisms when using reflective practice. These diverse reflective processes can be separated into two distinct categories, formal and informal reflective practice (see Figure 17). It is possible to further group these reflective categories into a number of reflective types, as illustrated in (Figure15: P123). These individual reflective types will be set out in more detail in the following section.

### ***5.8 Formal supervision and reflective practice***

In baseline interviews practitioners reported that a predominant enabling setting for the potential use of formal reflective practice was the context of formal structured supervision. For most practitioners formal supervision was a monthly event. All aspects of a practitioner’s caseload and work activity were discussed during this process:

***“Reflection in supervision a lot of it would be about the work and the process of how I went about trying a proposed outcome for the young person - how they got on in the group or had it brought anything up for me and looking at different options about how I can address a particular issue and looking at time-frames of how we will try this approach for a certain amount of time and evaluate it then.” (Pt.20)***

In the baseline interviews, nineteen practitioners described formal structured supervision as being a regular and frequent part of their supervisory arrangements. For these practitioners, formal supervision, while placing a focus on case management and accountability issues, also provided a potential opportunity to engage in reflective practice. However, the use of reflective practice as a component part of this supervisory process requires some qualification. While practitioners describe formal supervision as the main venue and potential opportunity to engage in reflective practice, for the majority of practitioners, reflective practice was not included as a consistently used component part of their formal supervision. The issue pertaining to the non-use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision will be further explored in the next section which addresses barriers to the use of reflective practice. The extracts below illustrate how practitioners describe the inconsistent role of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision:

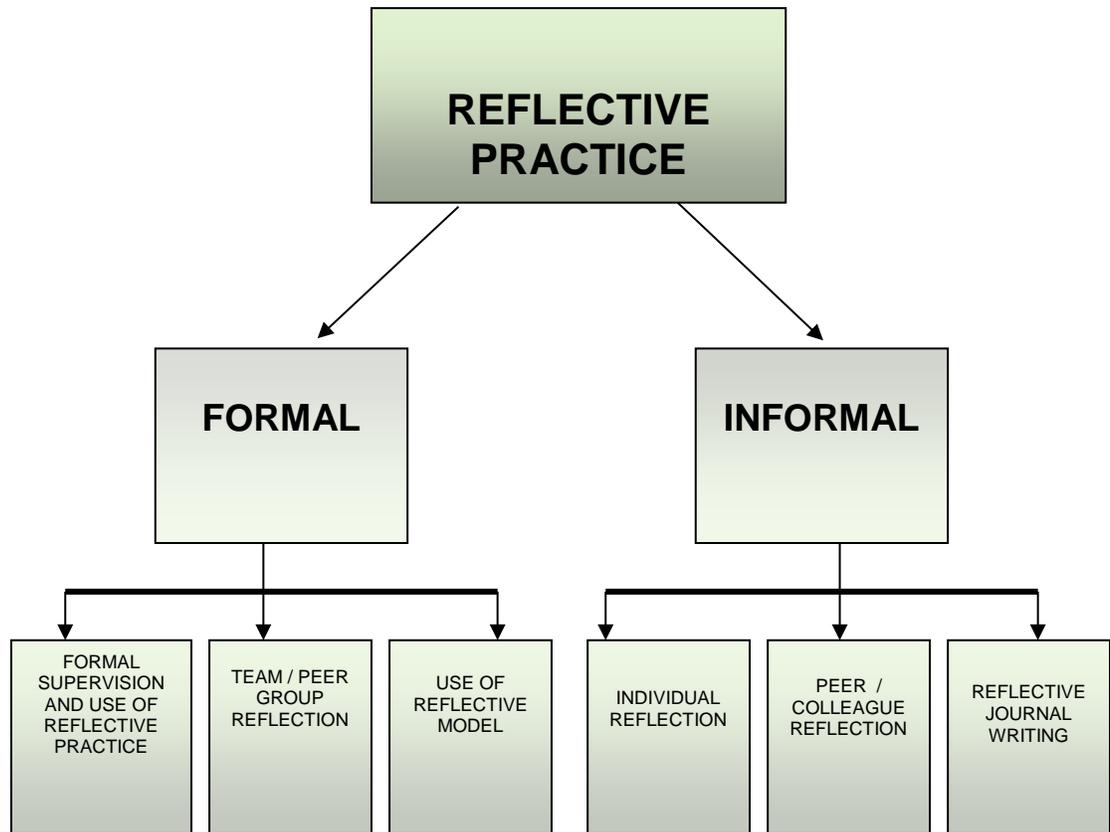
*“Sometimes, depending on the team leader, you get an opportunity to have a type of, what I would describe or understand as, reflective practice. Where you can discuss case management, problems you’re having with a case, but also how it’s affecting you, but that all depends on who your team leader is. I’ve had team leaders where it never came up...” (Pt.5)*

*“Well I mean it’s on the agenda. It’s there, it should take place in supervision and everyone agrees it should, but the reality is just sometimes a bit different.” (Pt.16)*

Nevertheless, the process of formal supervision was considered by practitioners at baseline as an appropriate and opportune time to engage in reflective practice. As the following quote illustrates, practitioners expressed the view that they need a forum of structured supervision to unpack and process work related issues with their supervisor:

*“And I think a key thing for me in my understanding of reflective practice is that you can reflect on your own, but I think that practitioners need tools to reflect. They need tools such as their supervisor, reflection through supervision, through conversation” (Pt.9)*

**Figure 16: Formal and informal reflective practice**



In follow-up interviews, practitioners reiterated the importance of formal structured supervision as a potentially enabling forum in which reflective practice could be used effectively. Practitioners reported that they considered formal supervision as an appropriate venue to discuss cases, review interventions made and to make decisions in terms of future case involvement:

*“More often than not it's speaking with my manager, supervisor, and working through the facts of the case, putting a note on the case and trying to come up with a decision. So, you see it will sometimes be in a formal base like supervision, but sometimes it would be through if something comes up and I'd organise a meeting with my manager to discuss it.” (Pt.7)*

While practitioners assert the enabling potential of formal supervision as a forum for engagement in reflective practice, there was also an acknowledgement that managers and supervisors need to 'buy into' the reflective process and promote and encourage the use of reflective practice for the process to be effectively applied:

*“I suppose it depends on how supervision is used. If it was used to promote reflective practice or if there was an element of reflection within it - because obviously you need to do the case management stuff - after you have done this decision and that decision - this piece of work, whatever - there was a piece of time allocated to reflecting on what you are doing - what you should be doing - then supervision could be used really well...” (Pt.16)*

Practitioners again reiterated the point in follow-up interviews that the inclusion of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision was not being consistently applied by managers and was not a routine feature of formal supervision or a specific policy imperative in terms of operational practice:

*“I don't know because if you ask people - they would all agree it is important and that it should be done. And you know even the managers encourage staff - but it just doesn't seem to happen in practice - even in supervision where it should be happening” (Pt.6)*

*“I think that it is showing me that it is necessary - reflective practice is necessary for management but it is not done because if it was done we would see the results and the results are in policies.” (Pt.5)*

### **5.9 Peer reflection**

During baseline interviews practitioners reported that using team meetings or peer-group sessions acted as an enabling forum and opportunity for practitioners to engage in collective reflective practice. During these semi-structured meetings, different team members would share a practice experience or intervention with team colleagues. The practice experience or intervention used would then be discussed and reflected upon for the purposes of shared learning. Practitioners also used these meetings as an opportunity

to bring a case to the wider team for the purposes of collective problem-solving through reflection and discussion of the presenting issue.

*“Something else in relation to supervision would be that we regularly have a case discussion, a reflection on the case during a team meeting as a team. One of the workers would identify a case that they would like to bring along and they would talk about, again, their experiences, where at, what they have done, and people would give constructive feedback about it.” (Pt.10)*

*“We have area team meetings every second month and we pick a particular topic and we use a structure. We are using different reflective models but we’ve kind of devised our own system at the moment which to reflect on the work.” (Pt.9)*

In follow-up interviews, there was a consensus view, again expressed by the majority of practitioners, that team meetings and peer reflection within these fora were an important influence enabling collective reflective practice. Practitioners articulated the view that team meetings engendered a positive reflective environment in which practitioners could informally consult with and seek out the advice and experience of other colleagues. Again, practitioners describe a process of reflection in which individual practitioners present a case to colleagues at team meetings and seek their collective input during a group discussion and reflection on presenting issues pertinent to the case:

*“We have group supervision here where we take a case in front of our team, you know, and as a group what can we do? Can reflect on what's - how the case is going, what avenues can be explored further.”(Pt. 6)*

Practitioners found this opportunity to consult and reflect with peers and colleagues an invaluable source of support for them. The value associated with this semi-formal reflective process was a consistent factor referred to by practitioners in terms of supporting and facilitating collective reflective practice:

*“I think I would like to put it on the agenda for the team - I think a certain amount of reflection happens informally - there is loads of conversations that happen over tea but I think it should be on the agenda for the team at team meetings - even if it is just one case a fortnight or something.”(Pt.16)*

### ***5.10 Mol an Óige model***

During baseline and follow-up interviews a number of practitioners made reference to what they described as a formal model of working with families which incorporated the use of reflective practice hence acting as an enabling factor. This model, known locally as Mol an Óige (Praise the Youth), was adapted from an American child care organisation named Boystown. The application of this model of working is unique to Mayo and Roscommon and was introduced in 2007 on a pilot basis across the two counties. The Mol an Óige programme is informed by a cognitive approach which includes the teaching of particular skills to both parents and young people who are referred to the programme. The programme places an emphasis on building positive relationships and operates from a strengths-based perspective.

The Mol an Óige model is described by practitioners who use it as being a technically reflective model with built-in reflective processes inherent within the approach. This technically reflective dimension is reportedly evident in the working mechanics of the model itself, for example, the use of formal assessment tools, and the development of what is termed a family service plan for each family based on the assessment. Practitioners also described the setting of goals and objectives with families which are all regularly reviewed and reflected upon to ensure progress was being achieved:

***“It’s reflecting your own self-awareness, your own approaches, your own manner of working and also continuously affecting the strategies that you are using, reflecting to see if everyone is on board. It’s a constant self-awareness and reflection on your work and how it’s influencing the family that you’re working with.” (Pt.4 Baseline Interview)***

As part of the Mol an Óige model of working, practitioners also described the inclusion of regular supervisory observations of staff during home visits. These observations were then the subject of review and reflection by both the supervisor and the practitioner to ensure the family service plan goals and objectives are on track. In addition, practitioners mentioned the use of monthly file audits, family review meetings, and what

was referred to as model fidelity checks which were undertaken with individual practitioners to ensure that practitioners were implementing the model correctly. They also described a process of ongoing structured reflection built into the model and the inclusion of a structured monitoring process to ensure that progress was being achieved:

*“So you’re constantly reflecting and I think the supervision process supports that, because it’s a supervisor coming with a worker and it is prompting them to think about the case as well. So it is an ongoing process...” (Pt.10 Baseline Interview)*

Practitioners who used the Mol an Óige model consistently expressed positive feedback regarding this enabling reflective model of working. Practitioners asserted that the Mol an Óige model incorporated in-built reflective practice that was manifest at different levels of programme delivery and resulted in more routine and consistent use of reflection and therefore enabled and promoted reflective practice in each case where the model is used:

*“Does it allow for it? Yeah, definitely through your observation, your feedback, your case supervisions, your file audits. There’s a huge accountability as a practitioner to be on top of your game and what’s useful is your supervisor perhaps can - of the cases that are of, I suppose, in crisis or - they can see perhaps and bring a value from the observations to your work. So that, yeah, there’s definitely - you’re constantly discussing and looking at and deciding - even just to get action plans and your family service plan as well that comes after.” (Pt.6 Follow-up Interview)*

*“I do think the Mol an Óige model has brought in; that does support actually reflecting by the nature of the way we work by doing observations, giving feedback and observing what we are seeing. That actually has worked for us.” (Pt.10 Follow-up Interview)*

### ***5.11 Informal reflective practice***

During baseline interviews the majority of practitioners reported that they engage in what they define as informal reflective practice. Practitioners commented that this method of reflective practice was the single most predominant mode of individual reflective practice used by them. This informal method of reflective practice reportedly

takes place when a practitioner feels the need to reflect, or has the inclination to consider a work scenario or practice issue, or when a practitioner has the free time to engage in the process. Practitioners who employ this approach described a cognitive process whereby they review, contemplate or consider a past, or sometimes future, event or a work-related issue. Practitioners described their use of this informal method of reflective practice as being an irregular occurrence. For some practitioners, the process takes place in the shower in the morning before work; alternatively, this method of informal reflection can take place during a car journey whilst traveling to or from a meeting. There is no set time or place to engage in this informal reflection, it is impromptu and unstructured. Practitioners reported it is more a question of finding an opportune time for this reflective process to take place:

*“Yeah, and it’s definitely when an opportunity arises, it’s not always possible because of the way we work, it would either be up in the office or out in the car, so a lot of it would happen in my own head.” (Pt.8)*

*“Well, usually it’s on my drive home after leaving a family. I have a good hour journey to de-role and to think back on what I’ve done with my families. I suppose I want to be reflecting on action. I strive to reflect-in-action, because you’re bombarded with different stuff that is going on in different families. Emotion is information for me. So if I leave a family and I’m on a high I usually think that was a good piece of work. But if I’m leaving and I’ve picked up on some anxiety, stress and frustration that gets me frustrated then I think ‘Okay, why am I frustrated with her?’” (Pt 6)*

In follow-up interviews practitioners reiterated that informal reflective practice was the single most predominant context for the reflective approach to be used. While most practitioners reported using both formal and informal modes of reflective practice, informal reflection was the most frequently and consistently used process employed by practitioners. Practitioners commented that using informal reflection was a more relaxed, flexible and immediate process which enabled them to contemplate and review aspects of their day-to-day practice:

*“I find it beneficial. I suppose because I have my way of reflecting I found it difficult to change that. I suppose it was in a very relaxed way, on the way home in the car or*

***thinking about things and trying to analyse where things went right and wrong and what I should have done differently.” (Pt.18)***

For other practitioners, using an informal mode of reflective practice was a more suitable process that essentially worked better for them because of the informality inherent in the process. Informal reflection, by its nature, is not planned and is not therefore restricted by time constraints. This more flexible, unstructured or ad hoc reflection was reported as more appealing for some practitioners.

Some practitioners, during follow-up interviews, expressed the view that using an informal reflective approach enabled them to overcome the challenges of finding an opportunity or time to reflect:

***“It’s not that I wasn’t able, it’s just it doesn’t suit me, I’ve more of an informal approach and being stuck to something is not the way it works, I wouldn’t go up that route... I prefer more informal because your reflective practice should be relaxed, it shouldn’t be that structured.”(Pt.17)***

***“I suppose most places in my work, it is to give myself time in my work because the biggest challenge is to reflect and it is and still the best place for me to do that is when I am driving.”(Pt.10)***

## ***5.12 Use of reflective journals***

During baseline interviews, practitioners were asked if they currently used a reflective journal or diary to assist them whilst engaging in reflective practice. A minority of practitioners stated that they did occasionally use a reflective journal. For these practitioners, writing down and recounting issues or events on paper worked more effectively for them in terms of engaging in the reflective process. This method of reflection allowed them to review and consider issues in a quiet and calm environment and enabled some practitioners to unpack and make sense of unfolding situations:

***“This case was particularly difficult and I did find that actually writing it down and recording it and thinking about it really helped. I may not be focusing on it all day***

*which could have happened. I do absolutely see the benefits in the reflective practice.” (Pt.18)*

All twenty practitioners were invited to retain a reflective journal as part of the research study. In follow-up interviews, however, there was a mixed response from research participants regarding the use of reflective journals. Only one practitioner from the non-action research group used a reflective journal during the course of the study while seven practitioners from the action research group retained and used a reflective journal during the research study. Those practitioners who did use the reflective journal reported positively about the experience. These practitioners described the reflective journal as helpful in dealing with difficult cases and an important aspect of their work:

*“I did, yeah. I try to be structured in my work, so I did try to use it maybe on a bi-weekly - sorry a bi-monthly basis. At times when I was exposed to the cases that are more intensive - to use it there.”(Pt.6)*

Some practitioners commented in follow-up interviews that using a reflective journal enabled them to reflect and probe more deeply into work-related issues.

*“Well I suppose what I found useful was that when you reflect in your head you can avoid or miss out on some things or not think about certain aspects - but when you have a particular structure there and to actually write something - you really have to think about it and what you’re writing and then you’re able to look back on it - you know in a few weeks’ time or whatever - even day to day things change - you perceive things - yea very useful.” (Pt.13)*

### ***5.13 Difference between the action research and non-action research groups***

In comparing differences between the action research and non-action research groups, in relation to enabling factors in their use of reflective practice, there was a marked difference between the two groups in relation to a number of areas. Only one practitioner out of ten in the non-action research group used the Johns model of structured reflection during the one-year research period. This compares with seven

practitioners in the action research group who used the Johns model during the same period as depicted in figure. It should also be noted that one action research participant dropped out of group.

There was also a marked difference between the action research and non-action research groupings in relation to the use of reflective journals. Only one member of the non-action research group used and retained a reflective journal during the research period. In comparison, seven members of the action research group used and retained a reflective journal during the same period.

The majority of practitioners who engaged in the action research process of this study commented positively during follow-up interviews in relation to the action research process itself. The action research process was reported by practitioners, as being an enabling influence in their use of reflective practice. They further expressed the view that the action research structure nurtured a discipline and commitment from each participant to engage in the action research process. In addition, they commented that the action research framework provided group dynamism and engendered an environment which placed a focus on the implementation of a particular reflective model. Practitioners reported that their involvement in the action research process provided time and space in which to participate in reflection, and also helped them to prioritize this process. For some practitioners, their involvement in the action research part of the study empowered them to identify the importance of the reflective process:

*“I think what made me start using it was I signed and agreed to the research and I gave a commitment to do it - so that’s - force is probably the wrong word - what encouraged me to stick with it. To get to the point that I was happy using it.”(Pt.16)*

*“For me it was time but I think, you know, through actually being involved in the group and the group we’re involved in now I think we need to be opening doors and creating opportunities like that to actually reflect and to make it a real and tangible and formal process so I wouldn’t see time.” (Pt.9)*

The action research component of the research study will be set out and discussed in detail in the next chapter.

#### ***5.14 How did workers' views contrast with views of managers in relation to enabling factors in using reflective practice***

There was no discernible difference or contrasting views expressed by managers in relation to the enabling factors that facilitated the use of reflective practice. Managers highlighted the same issues as those referred to by practitioners. There was a consensus view expressed by managers, and shared by practitioners, regarding the importance of reflective practice and making time to promote and engage in the process. Perspectives on the merits of using reflective practice were shared by both managers and practitioners. Managers commented also that they were aware of their role in promoting the reflective process:

*“Certainly I would be much more aware as the supervisor to be reflective and to encourage staff to be reflective. You can too easily get caught on - right, I have got this much time and I need to get through all these cases. The importance of helping staff to reflect and ask the questions. As I said, I am much more conscious of that when I am the supervisor.”(Mgr.7)*

It should be noted that managers and practitioners did express similar positive views in relation to the enabling factors that promote reflective practice, including formal supervision. However, feedback from practitioners during baseline and follow-up interviews indicate that reflective practice is inconsistently used in formal supervision and sometimes not used at all.

#### ***5.15 Barriers to use of reflective practice***

In this section findings will be presented on the reported barriers to reflective practice. Practitioners identified a range of obstacles that prohibited their use of reflective practice, the primary issue reported being pressures of time. Some practitioners also referred to being hesitant or fearful of addressing practice issues where they might be criticized. There was also some reluctance to engage in reflection by practitioners with

supervisors where there was a perceived lack of trust. Practitioners also expressed the view that the option to engage in reflective practice was not always available to them as some supervisors did not incorporate a reflective dimension to the supervisory process. Deficits in training regarding the use of reflective practice also prevented some practitioners from engaging in the process. These prohibiting factors, some of which were structural in nature, impacted upon individual practitioners and mitigated against the use of reflective practice. In the sections to follow, these barriers are discussed in detail.

### ***5.16 Time constraints***

During baseline interviews the issue of time and time-related constraints was articulated by the majority of practitioners as the single most predominant factor constraining them from engaging in reflective practice. Practitioners described their daily work schedules as being busy, and at times unmanageable:

***“Yeah, I’d say time constraints. Just getting bogged down in chasing things up every day and taking phone calls and drop-ins, aside from caseloads, and letting file work build up.” (Pt.13)***

***“Sometimes finding the time to record things and document, like I do document and record stuff but even further recording my thoughts and approaches I just wouldn’t have the time.” (Pt.20)***

Attendance at meetings, home visits, court appearances, interviewing service users, writing reports and maintaining case-notes, characterised the working context of many practitioners involved in this study. Practitioners described a sense of relentless pressure, constant work and always being busy. The ability to set aside time for reflective practice in this working environment was reported as a challenge for some practitioners and described as a luxury by others:

***“It’s a luxury and it shouldn’t be a luxury, it should be a basic necessity. But in child protection, the amount of work we have to do, the type of work we have to do, most of***

*the time you just do not have the opportunity to stop and think. The luxury of reflective practice is not going to be in my lifetime.”(Pt.5)*

*“Time would be a huge issue, I think and the demands of having to get things done and finished and get cases closed.” (Pt.10)*

In follow-up interviews the issue of time as a constraining barrier preventing or restricting practitioners from engaging in reflective practice was reiterated by practitioners as the single most predominant factor inhibiting their use of reflective practice. Practitioners again highlighted the pressures of work, busy schedules, writing various reports, maintaining up-to-date case-notes, undertaking home visits and court work as factors that render setting aside time for reflective practice as a challenge:

*“It is massively time consuming and, as I said before, in my opinion to give certain situations the relevant time for reflective practice, you honestly wouldn’t leave the building because it would take up so much time.” (Pt.15)*

It was also highlighted that the existing organisational structures that govern child care services do not incorporate or make allowances for practitioners getting time for reflection:

*“I do not think you could ask anyone on the team or management here that would not agree it is important and it needs to be done but - it’s actually then finding the time and allowing the time to do it.”(Pt.16)*

*“I suppose our structure of working. The whole child and family care service structure of working doesn’t really give time to it. I suppose that is coming back to it but to support it to happen.” (Pt.10)*

Linked to the issue of time was the allocation of what was described by practitioners as ‘heavy’ caseloads. These heavy caseloads resulted in work pressures to complete various tasks or in some instances the nature of a particular case may have included addressing more complex issues leaving little or no time for reflection:

*“Time, and I suppose caseloads, and I suppose it doesn’t seem to be held in such high importance in terms of management and supervision and things like that - you kind of think if you bring it up - oh God, there is more important things to be thinking about, caseloads to manage, so I think that’s quite a barrier.”(Pt.18)*

*“What would be the barriers? Well I mean on a very simple level, caseloads... time, yes it’s the simple things that would trip you up. Honestly, caseloads, time management, and things like that.” (Pt.14)*

It should be noted that the issue of heavy caseloads was a particular barrier prohibiting social work practitioners in this research study in their ability to use reflective practice. There was a considerably higher volume of cases allocated to social workers in comparison to child care practitioners who participated in this study.

In follow-up interviews a number of practitioners reiterated the pressures they felt under and experienced in terms of routine practice and maintaining heavy caseloads. Practitioners expressed the view that it was very difficult for them to plan time to engage in reflective practice as a crisis situation can unfold unexpectedly in which they may have to become involved at short notice:

*“I know I tried one or two ways to get around it and that is all fine and well - I suppose in your cases anything can happen in your job - you could get a call at five-to-five or five-to-nine in the morning of course and your whole day is turned on its head - we have such hectic caseloads all the time.” (Pt.16)*

One social work practitioner commented that in order for him to find time to engage in reflective practice, he would have to halve his caseload to create the time and space:

*“For me to be a reflective practitioner in my existing job would be to have to reduce the caseload. I mean, cut it by nearly fifty percent.” (Pt.5)*

### **5.17 Supervision as a barrier**

During baseline interviews the absence of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision was identified by practitioners as a specific prohibiting factor restricting their use of the reflective process. Practitioners acknowledged that managers were verbally supportive about the use of reflective practice, but that this did not translate into the consistent and practical application of reflective practice:

***“Well I mean it’s on the agenda. It’s there, it should take place in supervision and everyone agrees it should, but the reality is just sometimes a bit different.” (Pt.16)***

The majority of practitioners who participated in this study, reported the absence of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision at both baseline and follow-up interviews. Practitioners expressed the view that managers needed to integrate and actively encourage the use of reflective practice in order for it to become a routine aspect of the supervision process:

***“I suppose, as I said, if you knew it was going to be part of your supervision and that your supervisor kind of encouraged it and was comfortable with it as well.” (Pt.3)***

Practitioners expressed the view that supervision can be dominated by casework issues and a tick-box approach ensuring that tasks were completed. Engaging in reflective practice and the more detailed scrutiny and evaluation of issues as part of the reflective process was reportedly not given priority:

***“It is a little bit of both but the balance is tipped more so towards case management. There is definitely room for reflective practice but it depends on an awful lot of factors. There isn’t enough... I see the system as a living entity. It is very guarded and everyone has an investment in it. I mean why would case management be a priority over reflective practice” (Pt.15)***

In follow-up interviews, practitioners reiterated the view that reflective practice was not routinely and consistently used in the context of formal supervision (see Figure 18). Practitioners acknowledged that a verbal consensus prevailed agreeing that reflective

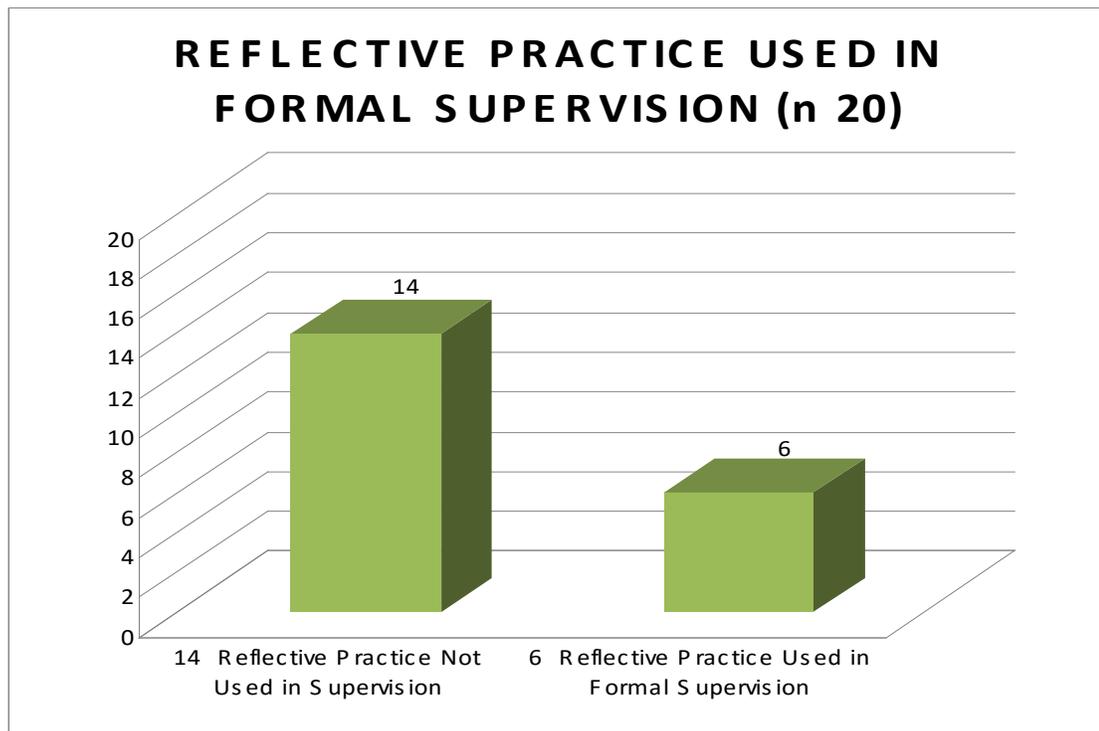
practice should be used, but the empirical reality for the majority of practitioners in this research study was that reflective practice was absent from formal supervision:

***“The other one is some sort of acknowledgment that it is necessary, and I mean that from a management level. You know, that it’s seen as being important, and I don’t know do we get that message.”(Pt.16)***

A number of practitioners, in follow-up interviews, expressed resentment and frustration regarding the non-use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision. This was particularly evident when practitioners were dealing with what they perceived to be difficult cases where they felt they needed a forum to unpack and reflect on aspects of the case in question:

***“I think it should be an integral part of supervision. In very difficult cases like the one I have used in my journal I felt I didn’t get any support... I feel it is very frustrating when you have got really difficult cases and it is not used as supervision because you are basically going in saying the facts of the case and told what to do. There is no space given to how you are feeling.” (Pt.18)***

**Figure 17: Reflective practice used in formal supervision**  
 (Based on follow-up interview data)



### ***5.18 Having confidence in supervisor as barrier***

In the baseline study, some practitioners expressed the view that they were reluctant to engage in reflective practice due to their concerns regarding the issue of having a trusting relationship with their supervisor. Practitioners also expressed concerns about being able and confident to discuss practice issues openly with their supervisor, particularly if the situation reflected negatively on them.

*“I suppose there is always the potential that you don’t want to - give too much away of your thinking - you’re like carrying stuff and thinking...If you don’t feel you had that relationship of trust. You need to be able to reflect back on every aspect of it -be it - if it looks bad on yourself - if you feel you did something really well...” (Pt.17)*

Some practitioners expressed reservations about engaging in the reflective process if their supervisor was not trained and skilled in the use of reflective practice. Reflective practice was considered a particular area of work that necessitated knowledge and skills on the part of the supervisor:

*“Yeah, well I suppose you’ve got to have people who are confident doing it with you. It’s not a case of someone saying “Okay, now I’m going to start doing reflective stuff”, you know? I definitely think there’s a skill to it.” (Pt.14)*

One practitioner expressed hesitancy in relation to engaging in reflective practice as he felt that to genuinely engage in reflection one had to be conscious and aware of self and one’s own self-bias. This practitioner is referring to a more in-depth form of reflection, akin to reflexivity, which places an emphasis on self and how self can influence a situation. Reflexivity has a close affinity to reflective practice. However, as this practitioner indicates, it is the ability to look inward and “ a turning back on itself” (In Fook et al., 2007, p.27)

*“You need to know a lot about yourself, because, if you know a lot about yourself, then when you reflect you are bringing all of that with you to what you’re reflecting on. That means who I am when I’m.. when I’m reflecting, result of my reflection, will depend very much on how much I know about me. Am I aware of my biases, my everything.” (Pt.5)*

In follow-up interviews a small number of practitioners again reported having a reluctance and, in some instances, a fear factor in relation to engaging in reflective practice. Some practitioners commented that engagement in a reflective process could have the potential to expose them to their own vulnerabilities, and, in some instances, their own prejudices. It was also suggested by some practitioners that reflection may be avoided because of some past personal experience that might be triggered by engaging in the reflective process. As the following interview extract illustrates, working in child care, particularly child protection, can be a challenging practice environment rendering reflective practice a difficult and sometimes fear inducing process to embrace for practitioners:

*“... I suppose the fear of reflective practice is a little bit in a sense that it can highlight maybe areas that you don’t want to think about, you know, maybe your own personal prejudices that can be highlighted in families. I think, for me one of the things - we had a client and I had to do some reflective practice with myself in relation*

*to, it was a case in relation to a baby and I was like going ‘Ok he’s a likable kind of guy but he hurt this baby’, you know, and I just had to think about how was I going to feel about that and how was I going to work with him.’(Pt.11)*

Another practitioner described a reluctance to engage in reflective practice and the non-use of the reflective process as a way to avoid or deal with difficult cases or decisions that need to be made:

*“Reluctance on both my and the supervisor’s role of bringing up certain things. Sometimes you can sit in a supervision session saying “I have to address this issue but...” (Pt.8)*

### ***5.19 Absence of training as barrier***

During baseline interviews, the majority of practitioners stated that they had received no formal training in relation to the area of reflective practice. There was a consensus view expressed by the majority of practitioners during baseline interviews that formal training in relation to reflective practice was needed. In addition, some practitioners expressed the view that this training should also be extended to include managers in order to enable them to better support practitioners in their use of reflective practice:

*“I think training. I think a lot of people need to be trained in this; everybody needs to be trained in this in the work place” (Pt.7)*

*“Definitely to receive formal training on a recognised course. That line managers have an understanding and a respect for it and do some formal training for it as well, so as they can guide their workers the best that they can. (Pt.6)*

Practitioners expressed the view that the absence of formal training in relation to reflective practice represented a constraint in the sense of their not having a full understanding of the reflective process and how to effectively use the process. Practitioners expressed an openness to avail of training in relation to reflective practice in order to expand their understanding of the reflective process:

***“I think it would be very good to have training about reflective practice. And ways to be exploring what reflective practice is and I suppose having the rationale as to why and making it meaningful to people as well. So that it is meaningful to their work and that it is supportive.” (Pt.10)***

In follow-up interviews a consensus view prevailed amongst the majority of practitioners that further training and support was needed to educate and inform practitioners about reflective practice. Practitioners expressed the view that a lack of clarity existed in relation to the concept of reflective practice, with practitioners having different interpretations of what the term actually means. The absence of training and informed understanding was again highlighted as a barrier in the application of reflective practice by practitioners:

***“There are needs for a definite model, a definite specific training and a way to deliver. I think, you know, we need to be told how to be reflective, you know, the term is just still out there, it’s still vague, not vague but, you know, people have different interpretations when really I think there is a set way, I think it could be nailed really well and if it was I think people would welcome it more.” (Pt.9)***

In follow-up interviews, some practitioners commented that they felt other practitioners claim they understand reflective practice but in reality still do not fully comprehend what is meant by the term:

***Sometimes if you say to workers, you know, when you talk about reflective practice, it is kind of like it is a name, what is it? It is like, I suppose when we are talking about it, it is really - what does it mean to you? What is it? (Pt.10)***

A number of practitioners commented on the importance of having additional training or workshops in relation to reflective practice. Practitioners felt there were benefits in this in terms of enhancing their understanding of the reflective process and also in relation to the benefits of using the process in their practice:

***“I actually think that if it was something I suppose that you had periodic kind of workshops or refreshers in or, I don’t know, even just like cases are brought together where you had to present them or something, you know, kind of where you have to...” (Pt.11)***

*“ I...we have touched on it a good bit in the course on family support and the importance of it and I have read up on it but as regards being formally trained in models of it.. no...but to me it is obvious...would be a benefit”(Pt.15)*

## ***5.20 Difference between the action research and non-action research groups***

There was a broad consensus amongst practitioners from the action research and non-action research groups regarding barriers and prohibiting factors that restricted the use of reflective practice. The single most predominant barrier reportedly preventing practitioners from both groupings using reflective practice related to time constraints and being busy:

*“I would say we don’t use it half as much as we should. And that is about the time demand, you’ve literally got one thing and then there’s another crisis...” (Pt.16: Action Research Participant )*

Participants from both groups further expressed the view that formal structured supervision was an opportune time and forum to use reflective practice but that the reflective process was under-used by managers and that this gap therefore represented a prohibitive factor in providing practitioners with the opportunity to use reflective practice in a consistent and structured fashion:

*“I don’t think you’d ask anyone on the team or management here that would not agree it is important and it needs to be done but - it’s actually then finding the time and allowing the time to do it.” (Pt.16: Action Research Participant)*

*“I think if I was consciously using it more. Maybe some training in it and then to use it consciously more, you know, and then have somebody, maybe my supervisor, to use it with me and make it regular.”(Pt.19: Non- Action Research Participant)*

Finally, practitioners from both groupings commented that training was needed to equip practitioners to better understand the reflective process and to familiarise practitioners

regarding the operational aspects of using a reflective model. Practitioners also expressed the view that training should be made available to managers to inform and equip them in the use of the reflective process:

*“That line managers have an understanding and a respect for it and do some formal training for it as well, so as they can guide their workers the best that they can. (Pt.6)*

*“I think there is a need for training to be honest, you know, a module of training. There is nothing out there, like I think I’m being reflective and promoting it but, you know, like there’s different trainings we go to like assist and you come away and you have your tools, I think there needs to be reflective tools for managers, there needs to be training where this is the process”.(Pt.9)*

### ***5.21 How did workers’ views contrast with views of managers in relation to barriers and inhibiting factors in using reflective practice***

Managers expressed a consensus on barriers that can prohibit the effective use of reflective practice. Like practitioners, the predominant factor referred to by managers related to time constraints restricting practitioners from engaging in the reflective process:

*“I think barriers really are probably around people being so busy. They just want to get on with the job and I think the problem with that is actually the busier you are, the more time you need to actually reflect.” (Mgr.2)*

*“The only time you meet with your line manager is around budgets or complaints. There is no time to reflect.” (Mgr.6)*

Some managers expressed the view, similar to practitioners, that the of absence of competent facilitation in relation to reflective practice may also represent a barrier preventing child care practitioners engaging in reflective practice. Managers commented that engaging in reflective practice was a potentially challenging exercise for practitioners that could potentially highlight emotional vulnerabilities and weaknesses in practitioners. Engaging in such a process necessitated trust and skilled facilitation:

***“ The second thing I think is everyone knows what it is about but it is actually the doing of it. I don’t think there are very many people skilled enough to actually facilitate.” (Mgr.7)***

Some managers also articulated the view that not all practitioners embrace the reflective process. Managers commented that some child care practitioners were not convinced of the benefits of engaging in reflective practice. They believed that some child care professionals considered reflective practice as “a bit silly”, while others considered engaging in the process of reflective practice as self-indulgent. The following interview extracts illustrates these points:

***“I think barriers can be a worker might not want to develop things a little bit further. They don’t see the purpose of it.” (Mgr.6)***

***“I think there is probably a culture of reflection in certain departments in the HSE, like Social Work and psychology. It is valued in there and I think supervision is valued in there. I think in other departments, it is seen; people are suspicious of some of the work that is done or they see it as being a bit silly.” (Mgr.2)***

***“It can appear as if it is self-indulgent and a bit precious and stuff.” (Mgr.1)***

For some managers, a clear barrier prohibiting the extended use of reflective practice by practitioners is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the reflective process. The following interview extracts highlight the confusion and lack of clarity that prevails in relation to the concept of reflective practice. The extracts also suggest that there is a misunderstanding in some pillars of practice regarding what actually constitutes reflective practice:

***“It is coming and it is being talked about but I don’t think people have a full proper grasp and understanding of what reflective practice is.” (Mgr.4)***

***“They say - reflective practice, oh yeah, I do it all the time - but we don’t. What we think is it, isn’t it. It is something else.” (Mgr.1)***

*“I think probably there is a general feeling that everyone knows what reflective practice is about. If you press people, they really can’t define it.” (Mgr.7)*

### **Summary**

There was a positive consensus evident among the vast majority of research participants in relation to the perceived multiple benefits that accrue from the use of reflective practice. During baseline and follow-up interviews practitioners identified numerous benefits that accompany the use of reflective practice. These benefits include; experiential learning; enhanced practice skills and knowledge development; the use of reflection to effect positive change to practice and the use of reflection to assist with work-related stress and anxiety. There was a consensus evident among research participants regarding the types of reflective practice employed by them to enable and facilitate their application of the reflective process. These types include; formal structured supervision, informal individual reflection, peer or group reflection and collegial reflection with a critical friend. Turning to the perceived barriers that prohibit the use of reflective practice there was agreement evident among the majority of practitioners in relation to the perceived barriers that exist restricting the use of reflective practice. These perceived barriers included, time constraints, heavy caseloads and, in some instances, a reluctance or fear on the part of practitioners to engage in the reflective process. Practitioners expressed the view that at an organisational level, there was a lack of training available in relation to reflective practice. The barriers and obstacles identified by practitioners were consistently expressed across baseline and follow-up interviews.

There were no discernible differences apparent in relation to the expressed views of practitioners in either the action research or non-action research groups regarding the perceived benefits that accrue from the use of reflective practice, the enabling factors that facilitate its use, or in relation to the barriers that prohibit or restrict the use and application of reflective practice. There was, however, a discernible difference evident in the research findings between the action research and non-action research groupings

in relation to levels of engagement. The overwhelming majority of the non-action research participants did not employ either the Johns model of structured reflection or reflective journals during the period of the research study. The action research participants more fully engaged with the process through their proactive participation while they were more committed in terms of their use of the Johns model and their use of reflective journals. Action research participants also expressed the view that the action research process itself was an enabling process that motivated their involvement in the research study.

Managers interviewed were also positive about the perceived benefits that result from the use of reflective practice. They articulated a positive appreciation of the reflective process and considered reflective practice an important concept in the context of child care practice. Furthermore, managers interviewed expressed the view that they considered their role in enabling the use of reflective practice, and as one of facilitating and supporting practitioners in their use of the process. While this grouping gave vocal support for the use of reflective practice, evidence from the research study suggests that reflective practice was inconsistently applied by managers in the context of formal structured supervision. Practitioners consistently expressed the view in baseline and follow-up interviews that, while structured supervision represents an opportune forum to enable reflective practice, the reflective process is invariably absent from this arena and not consistently used by managers to facilitate reflective practice. This absence, therefore, represents a barrier in terms of the use of reflective practice by practitioners.

## **Chapter Six: Findings**

### ***Introduction***

In undertaking this research study, I incorporate an action research component as a central feature of the overall research design. The action research methodology includes a four step cyclical process. This process is designed to address specific problem areas and develop solutions to these presenting problems. In addition, the Johns model of structured reflection was also used by participating practitioners as an overarching reflective approach to identify problem areas in the context of child care service provision. In this chapter I will set out the six problem areas identified by the participating practitioners involved in this aspect of the research study. I was also involved in this aspect of the study as a practitioner/researcher. Using an action research approach provided an opportunity to explore the use of reflective practice in the context of a structured practice setting and the benefits that can potentially be gained from using the approach in this structured environment.

### ***6. Research Questions***

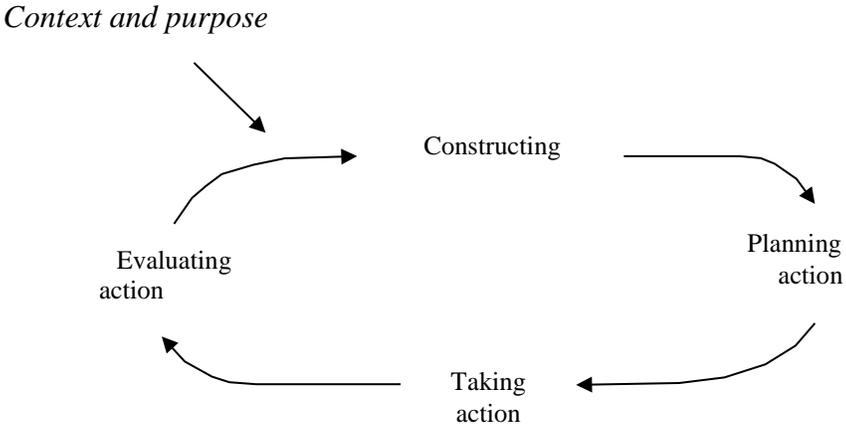
- (1) How is the concept of reflective practice understood and used in the context of child care service provision?
- (2) What is the value of using reflective practice in child care service provision?

#### **6.1 Research Objectives**

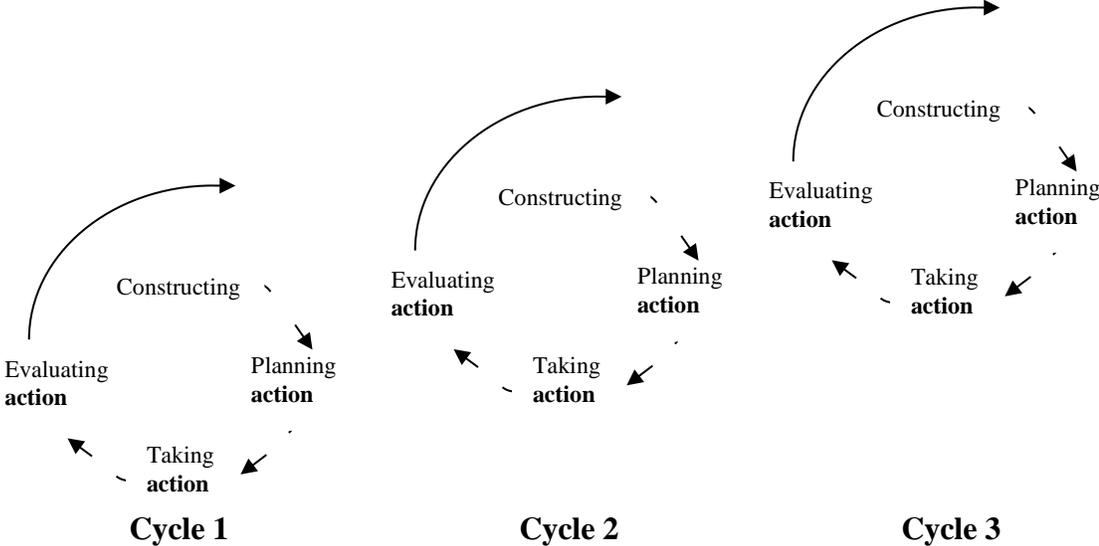
- (1) To elicit the views and experiences of practitioners who use reflective practice in the development of interventions with young people and families.
- (2) To elicit the views of service managers who supervise practitioners involved in the research study, in relation to reflective practice.
- (3) To compare the effectiveness of implementing a structured model of reflective practice (Johns model) using an action research framework, and in the context of a regular unstructured practice environment.

The action research model used in this study is similar to the four-stage cyclical approach described by Coghlan et al.(2010). This approach follows four distinct steps and takes place in the context of addressing a specific problem (s). For the purposes of this research study, the initial problem area identified when applying the action research approach relates to the problem of time management and pressures of time when practitioners are endeavouring to engage in reflective practice. In implementing this reflective model, a number of other related issues and problem areas were also identified and subjected to the same action research process. The steps in the action research process included: (1) the construction of the problem, (2) planning action to address the identified problem, (3) taking action to address the problem, and (4) evaluating the action taken. As the action research approach is an iterative process, the four-stage steps as outlined above are repeated in an ongoing cycle until a resolution to the problem (s) being addressed is found. The action research approach used in the context of this study is outlined in Figure 19 below with the iterative and cyclical nature of the action research approach used further outlined in Figure 20.

**Figure 18: Iterative action research cycle**

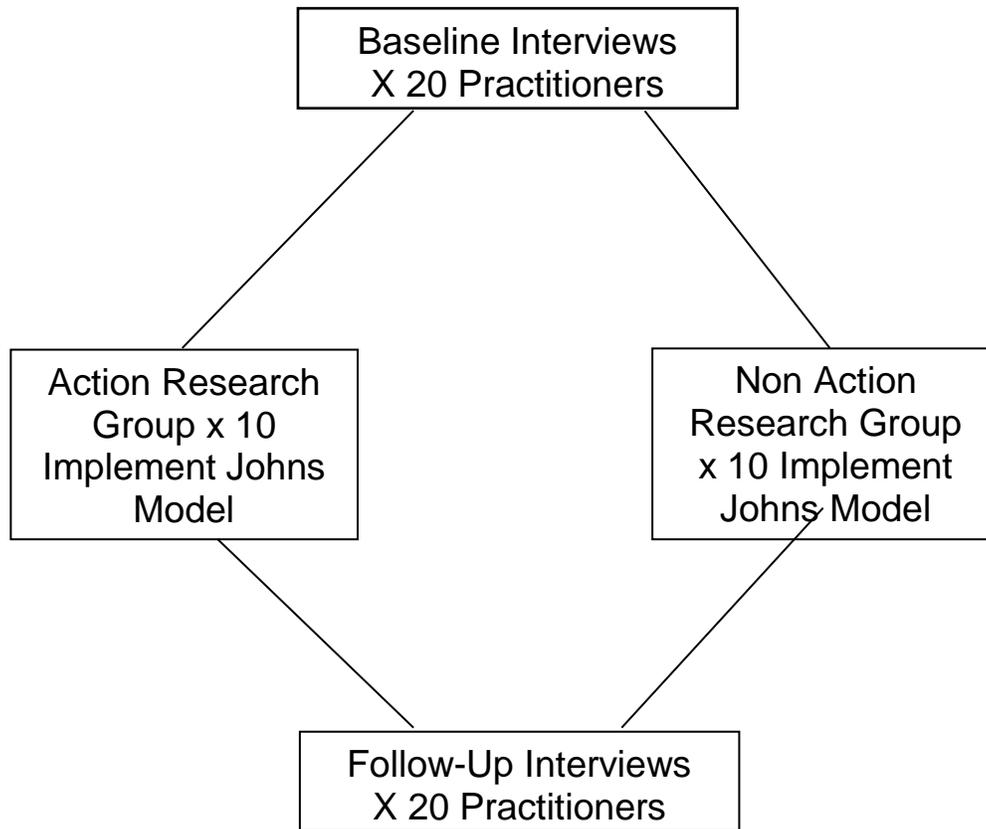


**Figure 19: Action research cycle**



The participants involved in the action research project were randomly selected from a larger group of twenty practitioners who had agreed to take part in the research study. The structure of the research groupings as illustrated in Figure 21.

**Figure 20: Structure of research groupings**



Ten participants from the group of twenty practitioners were randomly selected and invited to take part in the action research process which focused on implementing the Johns model of structured reflective practice. All agreed to participate in this component of the study. The action research process and approach was presented to the group by me as lead researcher using a power point presentation. Participants were advised that the action research approach is a democratic and collaborative framework in which participants are essentially co-researchers in the process. Ground-rules for the group meetings were agreed and included agreement in relation to attendance and confidentiality. Participants were also invited to retain a reflective journal as part of the exploration into the benefits of using reflective practice in the context of child care and family support. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis was

conducted by the group to consider any issues relating to the use of the action research approach and process. It was agreed that minutes would be taken at each meeting and that I could tape the action research sessions and make notes. A number of participants expressed a wish however to remain anonymous in relation to their individual contributions and identity. It was agreed that individual action research meetings would not be transcribed to ensure participant anonymity. It was further agreed that protecting the anonymity of participants would be respected at all times during the course of the research study. Participants also agreed to hand over their reflective journals to me at the conclusion for the purpose of analysis. These journals would also be securely maintained by me and returned to the each research participant at the conclusion of the research study.

**Table 1: Action Research Group Meetings**

Date:	Number of Participants Present:
14th June 2010	10
5th July 2010	8
26th July 2010	9
23rd August 2010	6
13th September 2010	7
4th October 2010	8
3rd November 2010	6
14th December 2010	7
18th January 2011	7
14th February 2011	8

In total, ten action research meetings took place between June 2010 and February 2011. The specific dates and attendance at each meeting is included in Table 1 above. The mean attendance level was 7.6 over the course of the meeting held. There was a consistent level of attendance at the action research meetings throughout the process. Most non-attending participants sent apologies. One participant attended only one action research meeting. This participant sent apologies for his/her non-attendance at other meetings, and subsequently advised me that he/she was unable to attend the action

research meetings due to work pressure and her being requested by her Team Leader to prioritize her casework over attending the action research meetings. Prior approval had been obtained from management allowing this participant to take part in the research project.

During the initial stages of the action research group process, some participants presented as hesitant about being involved in the research project and regarding the action research methodology itself. A number of group members requested that action research meetings were not taped to protect their anonymity. In week two, one group member expressed a concern about being able to speak openly at the action research meetings. This group member voiced concern specifically in relation to the area of confidentiality. This concern was made in the context of this group member feeling unsupported at work, and being the subject of reported ridicule by some team colleagues outside of the group because of his involvement in the action research process of this study.

***First significant problem identified using action research process identified by action research group. Ridicule and negativity of work colleagues towards an action research group member`s participation in research group. Problem put back to action research group - action research group developed solution to this specific problem SEE PROBLEM AREA TWO. This represents an example of the action research group process identifying a problem and developing a solution to resolve that problem. Memo 52: (Minutes 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2010)***

The group addressed this initial issue by reiterating agreed ground rules in relation to confidentiality and by ensuring minutes of meetings were sent directly to individuals via their email address and not through the postal system. This was deemed by the group to be a more secure method of communication within the group. In subsequent weeks, a trust and bond developed within the group and group participants were more relaxed and prepared to participate and make contributions to all issues under discussion. This more relaxed setting aided more vibrant and open discussions on emerging issues. There was

also an evident increase in the overall willingness of participants to become proactively involved in the group process. This was exemplified by levels of participation and dialogue around problem-solving issues that emerged.

Group participants adhered to the agreed ground rules which had been established at the beginning of the process. There was mutual respect evident amongst participants with each group member showing courtesy and a willingness to listen to the views of others. There was no evidence of tensions between participants at any point during the action research process. Each participant had equal time and opportunity to raise, or question, any issue under discussion. Both during the process and in follow-up interviews, action research participants expressed the view that this process enabled them to integrate with other professionals and learn from others` experience:

There was a level of honesty and frankness evident during the action research process in terms of contributions made by individual group members. This was particularly apparent in relation to comments made pertaining to the Johns model of structured reflection, which was subject to critical appraisal by group members. On evaluating their use of the Johns model the majority of participants found it cumbersome and difficult to apply. While group members adhered to the agreed task of implementing the Johns model, group members nonetheless critiqued the suitability of this particular reflective model:

***“I thought, you know, the other participants in the group, there was a lot of questions about the Johns model and the language around it and the use of it. I suppose visually I never liked the model on paper, just even looking at it, it looked way to tedious but I do think it’s a very, very good model.” (Pt.9: Action Research Participant)***

During the course of the action research process, six subject areas were identified by the group in relation to the implementation and use of reflective practice (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Issues Addressed by Action Research Group Process**

1.	Time management issues
2.	Issue of ridicule / Resistance by colleagues
3.	Using the Johns reflective model
4.	The use of reflective journals
5.	Problems in relation to organisational culture
6.	Depth of reflection / Critical reflective practice

The direct involvement of action research group members in the identification of these six subject areas gave the group ownership of the process, and ensured that it was a collaborative and democratic process being led by the group members. While harbouring some initial reservations, the participants embraced the action research process and adhered to the action research methodology and steps in addressing each subject area. This point is captured in the following memo recorded by me:

*Process of action research set out in detail. Outline of Johns model equally set out in detail and explained to the group. Initial review of action research process suggests that it's democratic, collaborative, action oriented and problem-solving.*

**Minutes of action research meeting held 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2011**

Group members expressed the view that engagement in the action research process placed the issue of reflective practice on the agenda, and enabled them to set aside time to explore the issue in more detail and address problems in relation to using the approach:

*“What I did find helpful in it, is that it just put the agenda of reflective practice on the table. It kind of brought my awareness more to it in the workplace, you know, it was putting it on the agenda.”(Pt.10: Action Research Participant)*

*“... because you have learned to kind of prioritize it more. It kind of gave you the permission to use it, you know once you're allowing your line manager to use it, or*

*you're going to these action research groups, so this is part and parcel of it. You could nearly kind of rationalise why you needed this time..." (Pt.6 Action Research Participant)*

Action research participants expressed the view that they found their experience in the action research project helpful in terms of developing strategies to aid implementation of reflective practice, and to overcome problems prohibiting its use.

Over the course of the ten action research meetings, the following problem areas were identified and addressed by the group using the four-stage action research problem solving approach as already outlined.

## ***6.2 Problem areas identified by the action research group***

I will now outline in more detail each of the six problem area identified by the action research group. This outline incorporates the four-step problem-solving process employed, and the iterative cycle used as per the action research process to resolve the problem area identified. The action research group participants identified the six problem areas using the Johns model of structured reflection.

### ***6.2.1 Problem area (1) - Time management Issues***

In terms of identifying obstacles preventing or inhibiting the use of reflective practice by practitioners, the recurring issue of time as a barrier was highlighted by action research group members. Indeed, the most cited issue by all action research participants was time management, identifying it as a prohibiting factor preventing practitioners from engaging in reflective practice. The following time-related issues were also highlighted by action research group members during a brain-storming session held as part of this meeting, and identified by participants as variables that inhibit their use of reflective practice:

- Creating space and time to reflect
- Getting into the habit of spending time reflecting

- Being in the right frame of mind or zone to reflect (time issue)
- Reflection not in culture of organisation - so time spent on reflection may not be valued or seen as a priority within organisation
- Workloads prevent reflection - (time issue)
- Theory different from practice - the theory of reflective practice is centred around support but not the practical use and application of the process
- Getting into the mindset to reflect takes time, space and no distractions
- Some practitioners reflect whilst driving or travelling between appointments - restrictions on mileage and limitations on driving reduces opportunity to reflect
- Lack of individual discipline to engage in reflection

(From minutes meeting held 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2010)

The following outline represents the action research process used by group participants to address the issue of time management as a barrier:

**Stage 1: Construction of Problem:** Action research group identified time management as a barrier preventing them from effectively engaging in the use of reflective practice.

**Stage 2: Planning Action:** Action research group undertake brain-storming session in relation to the presenting problem area of time management and the specific barriers that prevented them from engaging in reflective practice.

**Stage 3: Taking Action:** The following proposals and action plan were developed and agreed by the action research group to address the issue of time management.

1. Group members would pencil in specific time in their diaries each week for the purposes of spending time on reflection. This approach would overcome the problems of getting into the habit of reflective

practice and creating self-discipline. Setting aside specific time to reflect may also help individuals get into the right frame of mind.

2. Group members felt all staff needed training in reflective practice and this training should highlight the need to dedicate time to the process. This would break down the non-reflective prevailing culture. It was also thought that staff should get “time-out” with an external facilitator to assist with team reflection - someone like (named external group facilitator). This team reflection should be an annual event and not just when there is a problem.
3. It was agreed that group members would use their reflective journals in the context of writing about their experiences of supervision; e.g. issues that come up, positive and negative experiences etc. This would assist in getting into the habit of using reflective practice in context of supervision, spending time on the process and tackling the issue of the prevailing culture of non-reflective practice.

**Stage 4: Evaluating Action:** Following the first cycle of the action research process, the implementation of the plan was reviewed by the group. Individual participants reported back on their use of structured reflection and their use of reflective diaries to facilitate reflective time. Aspects of the plan were also tweaked to suit individual group participants. There was also some critical feedback evidencing that some participants were still unable to create the necessary time. The use of the Johns model was considered tedious and overly time consuming. At the next action research meeting, six members of the group reported back positively on the use of structured reflective time. The following quotations are examples of feed-back from the action research participants in relation to the use of structured or planned reflective time:

*“...felt that putting dates for structured time in diary brought discipline for her. It was a prompt and helpful to pencil in specific time for reflection” (Pt.8: Minutes Action Research meeting held 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2011)*

*“... felt it was a good way to work as when she writes it in her dairy she is more likely to do it (reflection)”.( Pt.12: Minutes Action Research meeting Held 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2011)*

*“...advised that the structured time did not work for her because of time constraints and pressures of work as social work team are under staffed.....felt that it is something that would work for her in the future”. Pt.16: Action Research minutes meeting held 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2010.*

### **Reflection:**

In the context of using the action research approach to address the specific issue of time as a barrier, group participants embraced the action research process and used the action research framework and cycles to develop a tentative solution to this identified problem area. The group participants developed a three-stage plan to address this issue. This plan identified the inhibiting factors which were perceived as preventing the use of reflective practice. The group overcame these inhibiting factors by developing strategies to address the problem using their reflective journals, and through the proposed acquisition of additional training to raise awareness. In addressing this problem area, the action research process facilitated a focused discussion and, ironically, given the issue related to time management as a barrier, provided the time and space to enable participants to address the issue using a reflective approach. The emergent plan was considered a potential solution to addressing the issue of time management.

### ***6.2.2 Problem area (2) - Issue of ridicule / Resistance by colleagues***

One action research participant encountered ‘resistance and ridicule’ (as described by him) from some work colleagues when he disclosed to them that he was participating in this study and particularly in relation to his use of reflective practice. The following extract is taken from the minutes of an action research meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2011.

The content of this extract illustrates the reported negativity experienced by the action research participant in relation to attending an action research session regarding reflective practice:

***“The individual stated that he was not going to name anyone but stated that when he mentioned he was attending this research group an individual said that “reflective practice was rubbish” - similar negative comments were also made by other colleagues along the same lines” ( Extract from minutes 14<sup>th</sup> June 10: Pt.)***

This issue arose in the early stages of setting up the action research group. The identification of this resistance and ridicule and the subsequent discussions on the issue resulted in some action research participants being reluctant to talk openly in the group about the issue. Some research participants also expressed concern about ongoing confidentiality and who could access the action research meetings’ minutes. Despite my endeavours to reassure research participants about issues pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity, this issue resulted in the action research group requesting that action research sessions would not be taped or transcribed in order to protect their anonymity and any contribution they would make to this and other issues. A compromise was reached in which sessions could be taped, to enable me to check session content, but not transcribed in order to further protect the anonymity of research participants.

In the context of follow-up interviews with other research participants in this study, there is some additional evidence of negativity or indifference towards the concept of reflective practice. The following interview extracts, for example, suggest that the value some practitioners place on reflective practice is questionable:

***“ I think some people think it is very airy fairy...I think some would not see the benefit in the sense that at times when we are extremely busy they would rather focus on team meetings and getting down to their work” (Pt.18)***

***“We all kind of, I think there is an umbrella, kind of laugh over it going “oh look at me reflective thinking now” or whatever, sometimes, you know...” ( Pt.17)***

The action research group agreed to address the issue of collegial resistance by naming it as a problem area, and using the action research approach to unpack it. The following outline represents an overview of the stages used and the learning achieved in this process to address this identified problem area:

**Stage (1) Construction of problem:** Dealing with resistance. Ridicule from colleagues and negativity from peers was identified by action research group participants as a problem area. This issue specifically related to an identified experience of an action research group participant. The group felt issue needed to be resolved to ensure that it would not prevent any other group participant from attending or discourage group participants from engaging in reflective practice because of the reported negativity of some colleagues.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** The following action plan and strategic approach was developed by the action research group to address the issue of collegial ridicule and negativity:

- Ignore such negative remarks
- Do not react to such negative remarks
- Learn more about reflective practice and defend learning
- Respond by “How you communicate back”. Suggest, in a calm way, that individual might learn something by using reflective practice themselves
- Use reflective journal to work through issue

**Stage (3) Taking Action: Action Plan Implemented**

Group agreement that this matter was a single-cycle issue and did not require further review.

#### **Stage (4) Evaluating Action: Action Plan Reviewed.**

Review of problem area by action research group at next meeting. Problem has not re-emerged and no further action necessary. This problem area to be kept under review during course of action research process.

#### **Reflection:**

As a result of the reported negative collegial experience of one participant, the action research group identified it as the problem area of collegial ridicule and negativity towards the concept of reflective practice. The action research process enabled a speedy and decisive action plan to be developed to address this issue. While aspects of this problem were beyond the scope of the action research group, immediate supportive action was taken to support the particular participant involved and to negate the potential of this negative encounter to discourage or force the participant to withdraw from the group. The action research plan developed provided participants with concrete strategies to address this problem if similar difficulties arose. There were no further incidents of collegial negativity reported during the course of the research project.

#### ***6.2.3 Problem area (3) - Using the Johns reflective model***

At the outset of the action research process, and as part of using the approach to evaluate the use a reflective model, it was agreed by the action research group participants that they would endeavour to implement the Johns model of structured reflection as a problem area to be addressed. Following the delivery of a PowerPoint training presentation by me in relation to the model, the group participants familiarised themselves with the reflective model and introduced it to their practice. It was agreed by group participants that each of them would use the Johns model in the context of their routine casework when an appropriate opportunity arose to employ the model. The model was used by individual action research participants over a number of months and regularly reviewed as part of the ongoing action research process. The following outline describes how the action research group participants employed the Johns model over the course of the action research project:

### **Cycle one:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** The issue of implementing the Johns reflective model was agreed by the action research group to be a problem area to be dealt with using action research process.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Action research participants undertook a briefing session in relation to utilisation of the Johns reflective model. Participants reviewed and discussed further implementation of Johns model. It was agreed that each participant required further practical experience using the model in order to properly assess its viability and value.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Johns model to be utilised by individual group participants in context of own casework. Each participant to actively identify case where model can be applied.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Implementation and use of Johns model reviewed on ongoing basis in subsequent action research meetings. Feedback obtained from individual participants during action research meetings regarding their practical use of the model was recorded in minutes and circulated to each participant.

### **Cycle two:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Problems encountered by the action research participants in implementing the Johns reflective model. Problems related to terminology used in Johns model. Problems encountered also in working through Johns model process and using different cue questions.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Additional written material circulated by lead researcher to inform action research participants regarding use of Johns model. Case study utilised by group using Johns reflective model by way of example. Action research group discussed the use and further implementation of the Johns model.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Following circulation of additional written information in relation to the Johns model and clarification in respect of terminology used in the model, action research participants agree further implementation of the reflective model and ongoing review of progress in future action research meetings.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** At next action research meeting implementation of the Johns model further reviewed and evaluated by action research participants. Following three months of using the Johns model, general feedback from the action research group regarding their experience was negative. The consensus view expressed found the Johns model cumbersome difficult to use and overly time consuming. The following comments from action research participants exemplify the critical assessment of participants towards the Johns model:

*“...felt that the Johns model was too tedious to use and that there was no flow to it.... also felt that there were too many questions and that some of the terminology was off- putting and jargon.” (Pt.10: Extract Action Research Minutes 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2011)*

*“...advised that his style of reflection was one of free narrative and that he found the Johns model very restrictive. (Pt.5: Extract Action Research Minutes 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2011)*

*“...commented that she uses the reflective model when dealing with challenging cases and frustrations as opposed to when she does something well... also felt the model wasn't particularly helpful when you're in the middle of a situation.” (Pt.9: Extract Action Research Minutes 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2011)*

### **Cycle Three:**

**Stage (1) Construction of problem:** Action research group express negativity about the use of the Johns reflective model.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Action research group decide that they would like to design their own reflective model to meet the practical needs of reflective practice in child care setting.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Action research participants discuss and explore the design of the reflective model. Tentative model design and structure discussed. This design included an electronic reflective ‘app’ that could be downloaded onto laptops and computers. The concept of an electronic “app” or application programme is essentially a computer programme that performs a specific task. These programmes are the most familiar form of computer software and are used in accountancy, various databases and in the area of graphic design. It was acknowledged within the group that this app would require specialist technical design and that there would be potential funding and patent implications to be further explored. However, it was envisaged that the app would be accessible via download and have built-in reflective questions. Practitioners could consult the app to guide and inform their reflection and case contemplation while dealing with a presenting scenario. The app would incorporate a number of reflective questions pertaining to specific situations. For example, if a practitioner was undertaking an assessment, the reflective questions would be geared towards assisting the practitioner in this task. If the practitioner was developing a care plan for a young person in care then a range of reflective questions would be available through the app to assist the practitioner to carry out this task. It was also suggested that the app might also incorporate a reflective cycle similar to, for example, the Gibbs model (1998) to further support the practitioner to engage in reflective process. Practitioners expressed the view that there was endless potential in this app design approach and it incorporated easy access and was less time consuming than, for example, the Johns reflective model.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Action research participants agree an embryonic reflective model type. Group agree that development of this model is outside the capability of the action research group process. It was agreed that the lead researcher would revisit the development of this embryonic reflective model with the group as a specific project upon conclusion of the current research.

### **Reflection**

Using the action research framework enabled research participants to explore the applicability of the Johns model of structured reflection in their different work settings. Research participants agreed to test out the suitability and practice value of using the Johns model in the context of the action research framework. The action research process facilitated the practical exploration of the model a reflective analysis of the pros and cons of using the approach. The emergent findings indicate that for a variety of different reasons, including the perceived rigid nature of the model, an inability to apply the model in retrospective situations, and what were perceived to be multiple questions that could not be applied to an unfolding situation, the action research participants expressed the collective view that the Johns model was unsuitable to meet their reflective needs. During the action research problem-solving process to find a solution to this problem area, a proposal emerged from the group regarding the potential development of an electronic reflective app to assist practitioners while they engage in reflective practice. The group considered some of the main benefits of using an app would be ease of access and less cumbersome in nature than the Johns model.

### ***6.2.4 Problem area (4) - The use of reflective journals***

As previously outlined, all ten action research participants were invited by the researcher at the outset of the study to utilise a reflective journal. Each participant was provided with an A4 hardback copy notebook to use as a reflective journal. Participants were also given some literature regarding the use of reflective journals (for example of literature - see Appendix S) and some sample extracts of reflective journal entries taken from a reflective text. Participants were asked to hand back the reflective journals to the

researcher at the conclusion of the study one year later. Participants were further advised by the researcher that using the reflective journal was a voluntary option for each participant and the extent to which the reflective journal was utilised was a matter for each individual. Issues in relation to confidentiality and anonymity were addressed as part of this agreement. All ten practitioners in the action research group agreed to use the reflective journals. The following outline represents the action research process used by group participants to address the issue of using reflective journals:

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** The use and benefits of reflective journals by action research participants was identified as a problem area and made subject to the action research process.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Discussed the logistics and practicalities of using a reflective journal. Further discussed and explored the type of entries to be included. Discussed using reflective journal in conjunction with Johns reflective model.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Each action research participant agreed to utilise a reflective journal during course of action research process. It was further agreed that participants could use journal in conjunction with Johns model, however, this was a matter for each participant to decide upon. Participants' reflective journals would be subject of review.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action Taken:** The researcher checked in with action research participants during course of research period regarding the use of reflective journals. All participants reported using their reflective journals. Evidence regarding the value of using a reflective journal was largely inconclusive in the context of this study as there was both positive and negative feedback from practitioners in relation to their experience of using the reflective journal as exemplified by the minute extracts below:

*“...found the journal helpful and it helped her to do thinking whilst doing.... uses the Johns questions as a prompt and guide.... felt she would continue to use a reflective journal after research project” (Pt.8: Extract Action Research Minutes 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2011)*

*“...commented that she found the reflective journal really helpful and was using her reflective journal a lot but that she was not really a big fan of the John model”*  
(Pt.6: Extract Action Research Minutes 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2012)

*“...advised that she hated using the reflective journal - she found it a huge chore and had particular problems with using language... did not feel she would use journal after research project” (Pt.9: Extract Action Research Minutes 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2011)*

*“...stated that she does not like journaling and that she found it a chore and didn't find it at all helpful...felt she would not use a reflective journal when research project was over. ...also commented that she did not think a journal would help her tease out deeper issues or assist with deeper reflection, in fact, she felt using a journal would be a barrier” ( Pt. 10: Extract Action Research Minutes 14<sup>TH</sup> December, 2011)*

### **Reflection:**

All ten reflective journals from the action research group were returned to me for analysis one year after the group had received them. The majority of practitioners, seven out of ten, reported back positively about using the reflective journal. Some practitioners in the group used the reflective journal extensively while for others, their reflective journal use and entries were sparser. A minority of participants reported that they did not like using a reflective journal and even found the process an obstacle. Some practitioners reported finding the process of writing down their thoughts helpful and productive while for others it was an unproductive chore. The absence of adequate training in the use of maintaining and using a reflective journal may also be another factor which prevents practitioners from using this reflective approach. In the context of this research study it is also pertinent to highlight that those practitioners who did use and retain a reflective journal did so as part of the study. Outside the confines of the

action research process it is difficult to evaluate the sustainability of practitioners using reflective journals. It would appear, based on feedback from participants, that using a reflective journal is possibly a personal preference for some but not all practitioners.

### ***6.2.5 Problem area (5) - Problems in relation to organisational culture***

The status of reflective practice in the context of organisational structures and culture was highlighted as an issue in the action research group. The following extract from action research minutes illustrates this point:

***“Reflection is not in culture of organisation - so time spent reflecting may not be a priority for organisation or valued.”(Extract minutes 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2010)***

This sentiment was based on the perceived lack of value placed on promoting and using reflective practice at organisational and management levels. The absence of adequate training and the non-use of reflective practice in supervision, and non-implementation of a specific policy document promoting reflective practice (Agenda for Children`s Services - A Policy Handbook, 2007) was perceived by some group participants as evidence of lack of support for reflective practice at organisational level. There was some evidence of reflective practice being used and promoted at local team level; this was not evident in the larger organisational culture. The action research group acknowledged that the promotion of reflective practice in the context of larger organisation was a macro issue beyond the scope and capacity of the action research group. The agreed strategy, as the following minute extract illustrates, was to address the issue at local team and collegial level:

***“A consensus emerged that the most effective and immediate way to introduce a culture of reflection was to do so through engaging colleagues and team in reflective process.”(Extract minutes 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2010)***

The following outline represents the action research process used by group participants to address the issue of organisational culture:

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Lack of priority and value given to use of reflective practice in context of organisational culture. Consensus of group was that a culture of reflective practice needed to permeate at all levels of the organisation as envisaged by the approach advocated in the Agenda for Children`s Services - A Policy Handbook.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Discussed issue of reflective practice in context of organisational culture. Brainstormed ways and methods to make reflective practice more valued.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** It was agreed that addressing overarching organisational cultural deficits at macro level in relation to use and promotion of reflective practice was beyond the scope of action research group. The action research participants agreed nevertheless to promote the use of reflective practice in the context of their own teams and thereby endeavour to influence local practice. This would include case profiling and collective engagement on reflective process at local team meetings. It was further suggested that some colleagues might find using learning-sets<sup>3</sup> of value. This information available if required. In addition, the issue of ensuring that a reflective element is included on supervision agenda also to be promoted at individual level, thereby beginning to build a basis on which the reflective approach can be used and further promoted at a local practice level.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Use of strategies to promote additional reflective practice in context of organisation to be reviewed at subsequent action research meetings

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<sup>3</sup> Learning sets. Some organisations invite interested parties to form a “learning set” about a particular issue or set of issues (the introduction of a new policy, for example, or a particular aspect of practice that is causing concern). The group will meet for a set amount of time over an agreed period to explore the topic in question and seek to use the opportunity (the group reflective space created) to learn about the subject matter and consider how best to take it forward. Thompson et al. (2008, p.70)

**Cycle Two:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Lack of priority and value given to the use of reflective practice in context of organisational culture.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Action research participants agreed that promotion of reflective practice and placing value on use of this process in organisational culture best achieved through engaging colleagues and managers at local practice level.

**Stage (3)** Further promotion of reflective practice to be promoted by individual group participants within the context of own team.

**Stage (4)** Action research group consensus that effecting change at level of organisation difficult and requiring policy change. Action research group endorse introduction and roll out of Agenda for Children's Services Policy Handbook. This policy document considered a more effective way to introduce and promote reflective practice in context of organisation.

**Reflection:**

The absence of a reflective organisational culture within the Health Service Executive was identified by the action research group as a prohibitive factor in the non-promotion of reflective practice within the context of child care services and other allied professions. The action research group participants expressed the view that the absence of an organisational culture in relation to reflective practice impacted on the value placed on the use of the process and the degree of support provided to staff in developing the approach. The action research group concluded that the development of an organisational culture was a macro issue which needed to be addressed through the use and implementation of an identified policy. However, there was agreement that local endeavours by participants to promote the use of reflective practice at team level would be attempted. This would involve initiating reflective team meetings and introducing a

reflective dimension in the local team context and peer review of cases. Collective profiling of specific cases was also suggested as a possible option.

### ***6.2.6 Problem area (6) - Depth of reflection / Critical reflective practice***

The extent to which action research participants engage in critical reflective practice and the depth of reflection undertaken by participants was acknowledged by the action research group as a problem area. There was a consensus within the group that reflection in the context of child care practice should also involve a consideration of broader social issues. The group identified the following issues as being linked to the use of critical reflective practice:

- Oppression
- Injustice
- Discrimination
- Poverty

**(Minutes action research meeting held 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2011)**

The use of a critical reflective perspective applied by practitioners was raised as an issue by the action research group. The significance of critical reflection for practitioners in the action research group is illustrated in the following extract taken from minutes at an action research meeting:

***“There was a consensus that being aware of issues in relation to discrimination, poverty, inequality and oppression were legitimate areas of critical reflection that child care staff should be aware of in the context of anti-discriminatory practice.”***

**(Minutes action research meeting held 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2011)**

It was also highlighted within the action research group that social work practice is informed by an ethos underpinned by a critical theory orientation. This emphasis on incorporating a critically reflective dimension to practice was another important factor

motivating practitioners to embrace critical reflective practice. While the importance of critical reflective practice was acknowledged within the group, it was equally asserted that there are limitations facing practitioners in relation to the extent to which they can apply critical reflective practice in their daily work. These limitations relate to what was perceived as restrictions laid down by employers. The following extract from minutes of an action research meeting capture this point:

*“It was highlighted in the discussion that one’s employer can place limits on the degree and extent of the critical reflective practice that can happen within an organisation.”* (Minutes action research meeting held 18<sup>th</sup> January 2011)

The sense that practitioners feel restricted or disempowered in their application of critical reflective practice was further highlighted by action research participants. One practitioner felt that engaging in critical reflection was futile because they were unable to follow up and do anything constructive about any broader social issues such as poverty. Another action research participant felt that power differentials within society made it difficult for practitioners to challenge in particular situations. These points are illustrated in the following extracts from action research meetings:

*“ ... felt that it wasn’t that critical reflection was limited but rather the actions which follow this critical reflection that can have limitations - there was agreement in the group about this point.”* (Minutes action research meeting held 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2011)

*“It was also highlighted in the discussion that it can be difficult to challenge in certain situations because of power differentials and also because individuals felt disempowered and potentially vulnerable for voicing a challenge.”* (Minutes action research meeting held 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2011)

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Depth of thinking and use of critical reflective practice was identified by practitioners as a problem area.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Discussed issue of depth of critical thinking and use of critical reflective practice by practitioners. Ethos of social work/child care practice; advocacy, empowerment of service users, challenging

discrimination, inequality and injustice, awareness of issues in relation to poverty.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** It was agreed that action research participants would take individual responsibility and be more aware of issues in relation to poverty, inequality and oppression. Action research participants would endeavour to use reflective process to also engage in critical reflective practice. Participants agreed that specific training in relation to anti-discriminatory practice should be requested.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Recognition within action research group that organisation can limit and inhibit the extent of critical reflective practice possible. Issue concluded as this was last action research session held.

### **Reflection:**

In considering the issue of critical reflective practice, the absence of this approach in child care practice was identified as a pertinent matter to be addressed using the action research process. The limitations on effecting change in relation to this issue were recognised by group participants. In addressing this issue, gaps in practice in relation to this area of practice and levels of awareness regarding critical reflection were highlighted. These gaps informed the action research group in relation to the use of a critical perspective and the need to adopt a broader social outlook while working with vulnerable service users. The action research process also highlighted the need for specific training in relation to the critical perspective and the need for individual practitioners to also take responsibility for their professional awareness and understanding regarding the issue.

### ***Summary***

The use of action research in this study provided learning in relation to the advantages of using a structured reflective framework to assist practitioners to engage in reflective practice. The action research methodology incorporates a systemic structure and reflective process that is conducive to enabling practitioners to be more routinely and more effectively reflective in their practice. The action research methodology integrates

a transparency and discipline that promotes reflection as an in-built dimension of the process. In addition, the action research approach overcomes many of the reported barriers that were identified by practitioners in this study and which prohibited them from engaging in reflective practice. For example, the issue of time as a barrier is almost fully negated as an issue owing to the technically reflective nature of the action research approach where engaging in reflection is an integral aspect of the process. Using the action research approach also empowers practitioners to engage in reflective practice by giving them ownership of the process and allowing them to collectively decide on the pertinent issues to be reflected on and which can potentially enhance their practice.

In relation to assessing the suitability of the Johns model of structured reflection, the action research process was critically employed to evaluate this approach. Practitioners, having endeavoured to use the Johns model, deemed the approach to be unsuitable and cited a number of reasons to support this position. Indeed, in using the action research process, practitioners developed an alternative and innovative idea to develop a new and different reflective model that they felt better suited their needs. The idea to design and develop a reflective model using an app was beyond the scope of the action research project. However, this idea reinforces the additional potential benefit in using a collective reflective forum and approach to address problem areas of practice. The development of an app to assist practitioners to engage in the reflective process is a credible and innovative suggestion that can be further developed going forward.

## **Chapter Seven: Discussion**

### ***Introduction***

In this chapter a discussion will be developed in relation to the use of reflective practice in the context of child care service provision. This discussion will address the overarching research questions and objectives underpinning the study. In particular, this chapter will consider the findings on how practitioners use the reflective approach and also the benefits they perceive that result from its use. The chapter will also discuss the reported advantages of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment. Consideration will also be given in this chapter to the importance of the theory base that informs reflective practice and the importance of theory in developing effective and knowledgeable practice. This research study has also identified a number of deficits in relation to the use of reflective practice. These deficits will be explored, highlighting how the reflective approach may not have been used to its full potential. In concluding this chapter, I will present a general framework within which the process of reflective practice can potentially be employed more effectively and uniformly to assist practitioners.

### ***7. Practice context***

Before embarking upon a discussion in relation to the value of using reflective practice, I will briefly contextualize the centrality of the reflective concept and set out the rationale underpinning this study. The provision of child care services and, in particular, the services provided by social work and family support practitioners represent the practice context in which this study took place. All of the research participants who took part in this study are professionally qualified practitioners who are employed to work in either the statutory or voluntary child care sector. The provision of social work and family support may bring practitioners into contact with families who are vulnerable, facing adversity and who may present with multi-faceted and complex problems. In addition, some families and children will be involved with social work professionals in relation to child protection issues that require investigation and appropriately thought-out and effective interventions. It is in this practice context that the use of reflective

practice may potentially assist practitioners to unravel complex situations and be more thoughtful and contemplative in developing effective and appropriate interventions to address such matters. As Thompson (2008) notes, the social work task is essentially an intellectual activity which requires practitioners to employ sharp analytical skills to unravel complex situations. Similarly, Wilson et al. (2008) highlight that the social care task is characterised by working in an environment where there is complexity, uncertainty and risk. Trevithick (2005) further points to the need for practitioners to use theoretical, factual and practice knowledge in undertaking their professional duties. Dolan et al.(2006) highlight the need for practice to be guided by specific practice principles in order to maintain good quality service provision and best practice.

In discharging the above practice duties and responsibilities, and in developing effective interventions to protect children and support families facing adversity, the use of reflection can potentially support effective practice. The use of reflective practice is considered within a wide range of professional disciplines to be an essential and integral element of practice (Finlay, 2008). It can be suggested that the use of reflection should be embedded in all practice and equally within broader organisational cultures that are responsible for the provision of child care services. Reflective practice is employed to inform, guide, and support practitioners in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities (Hargraves, 2013; Thompson, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Reflective practice is, therefore, an inherently important dimension to social care practice. As Thompson (2008) notes, engaging in reflective practice is not a luxury but a practice imperative.

### ***7.1 Rationale for research study***

The main rationale for undertaking this exploratory research study is to address an existing gap in the current research literature in relation to the concept of reflective practice. Specifically, this research seeks to evaluate the use and benefits that reportedly result from the application of reflective practice in child care service provision. There is a substantial body of existing literature in relation to the area of reflective practice which spans different professional disciplines including education, nursing, and social work practice. However, despite this proliferation of literature, White et al. (2006) note that

there has been relatively little empirical research undertaken exploring the value and effectiveness of the reflective methodology given this reported extensive use. Further critiquing the absence of evidence supporting the concept of reflective practice and advancing a more sceptical position, Ixer (1999) contends that due to the absence of such empirical evidence validating its effectiveness, it is questionable if such a reflective theory even exists. In undertaking this empirical research study, it is hoped to add to the existing body of knowledge in relation to reflective practice. In addition, it is further anticipated that this research study will provide new insights and understanding in relation to the meaning and use of reflective practice as applied from the perspective of front-line social work and social care practitioners, and their managers.

A particular rationale informing this research study is to ascertain the factors that enable and, alternatively, prohibit the use of the reflective approach. This research study further explores the use of the reflective approach in the context of a structured action research practice setting. This component of the research design provides new learning regarding the potential advantages of using the reflective approach in the confines of a supportive structured environment and adds to the existing body of knowledge in this area of practice.

## ***7.2 Research questions and objectives***

Two research questions were addressed in undertaking this empirical research study. The first question sets out to gain an understanding regarding the use of reflective practice in the context of child care service provision. This question addressed, in particular, how child care practitioners apply the reflective approach, in what practice context they use the reflective practice and how they were supported in its use. In addition, this question also considered the enabling and prohibitive factors that support or inhibit the use of reflective practice. In addition, this research question further explored the use of reflective practice in the context of a structured practice setting and if having this supportive structure assisted practitioners in their use of the reflective process. The second research question explores the reported value of employing reflective practice. This question endeavours to ascertain the practice benefits that result

from using the reflective approach. In particular this question sought to identify specifically how using reflective practice enhances practice. The two research questions addressed in this study are set out below:

- How is the concept of reflective practice understood and used in the context of child care service provision?
- What is the value of using reflective practice in child care service provision?

In undertaking this study and in order to address the above research questions three main research objectives were also identified: firstly, to elicit the views and perspective of twenty child care practitioners who use reflective practice; secondly, to obtain the views of ten service managers who supervise these practitioners regarding their perspective in relation to the reflective approach; and finally, a further objective of this study sought to compare the effectiveness of using reflective practice ( Johns model) in the context of a structured action research practice environment in comparison to the use of the model in an unstructured and more routine practice setting. The three research objectives are outlined below:

- To elicit the views and experiences of practitioners who utilise reflective practice in the development of interventions with young people and families.
- To elicit the views of service managers who supervise practitioners involved in the research study, in relation to reflective practice.
- To compare the effectiveness of implementing a structured model of reflective practice (Johns model) using an action research and non-action research methodology.

### ***7.3 Reflective practice in operation***

Undertaking this exploratory research study has provided an opportunity to learn how practitioners use reflective practice. Findings from this research indicate that there was no uniform understanding evident among research participants regarding what constitutes reflective practice. The absence of descriptive detail in practitioner accounts may be linked to their lack of training. Training in relation to reflective practice was identified as a specific deficit by all practitioners interviewed. Definitions advanced regarding reflective practice were vague and unspecific with no practitioner describing the consistent use of any reflective model. One exception to this was the use of the Mol an Óige programme. This programme incorporated built-in reflective mechanisms such as regular service plan reviews, file audits, staff observations, and more frequent staff supervision. Nevertheless, this study has demonstrated that practitioners employ reflective practice in different ways and in various settings, for example, through formal supervision, through the use of more informal reflection with colleagues and peers, and, alternatively, through individual self-reflection. The vast majority of practitioners who participated in this research study asserted that they use some form of reflective practice and that they considered the approach important in their practice. A minority of practitioners, two in total, indicated that they did not routinely use reflective practice. Indeed, there was some evidence in the study that not all practitioners necessarily see the value of using reflective practice. One practitioner, for example, suggested that the idea of reflective practice was over-stated and suggested that practitioners naturally reflect. There were also some difficulties experienced by a research participant in the action research group, who encountered some verbal negativity from colleagues for attending action research meetings. One comment from a colleague described reflective practice as “airy fairy”.

This study has demonstrated that, for some practitioners, engaging in reflective practice can represent a potentially difficult and challenging task. For example, reflecting on professional deficits or on mistakes made or, alternatively, reflecting on their emotional vulnerabilities can be a difficult prospect. A number of practitioners described using

reflective practice as a means to contemplate on and unpack stressful incidents and events. A specific connection was made by research participants between their use of reflective practice and their professional self-awareness, for example, in relation to dealing with the emotional intensity of particular practice scenarios and in terms of addressing their own anxieties and emotional triggers. One example, advanced by a practitioner, related to a decision made to initiate care proceedings and place children in care. This was described by the practitioner as a very difficult decision to make in the presenting circumstances and a decision which generated considerable anxiety. This practitioner described her use of reflection to address this case decision and enable her to make sense of the rationale behind the decision.

Research participants highlighted a number of specific areas where the process was used by them. For example, links were made by practitioners between their use of reflective practice and experiential learning. Similarly, connections were further made by research participants regarding their use of the reflective approach and the identification of deficits in their practice skills and knowledge base. Practitioners made further links regarding their use of reflective practice and ongoing professional development and learning. Many of the examples cited by practitioners related to practice scenarios and practitioners reflecting retrospectively or “looking back” on actions taken and on learning emerging from these actions.

These findings are consistent with the literature in relation to the use of reflective practice. For example, the concept of reflective practice is linked within the literature to the enhancement of professional practice and the development of practice knowledge and skills. Refinement in practice is gained by practitioners through their use of reflective practice in a process involving experiential learning (Laing, 2013; Rolfe et al., 2011; Bolton, 2010; Thompson, 2008). As noted by Taylor (1998), practitioners use the reflective approach to assist them in competently and effectively fulfilling their professional role by providing a systematic and thoughtful means by which practitioners can make sense of their practice. There is a further consensus in the literature with the use of reflective practice and subsequent learning and ongoing professional development

(Bolton, 2010; Share, 2009; Rolfe et al., 2011; Kolb, 1998; Johns, 2003). Seleebeey (2013) makes links with the use of reflective practice and the subsequent development of heightened professional self-awareness. Hargreaves et al. (2013) further identify a plethora of positive factors associated with the use of reflective practice including embedding good practice, improving practice and developing professional skills.

This research study has also provided insight into specific areas where the reflective approach is not used to its full potential. For example, practitioner accounts suggest that the use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision is not always routinely included. Furthermore, a number of deficits in the use of reflective practice were omitted from practitioner accounts. These areas of practice included assessments and the importance of using reflective practice to promote relationship-based practice. These areas of deficit in the use of reflective practice will be addressed in more detail in section (7.7) of this chapter. However, practitioner accounts in this study portray their use of reflective practice as an important operational dimension to child care practice. The development of more informed, analytical and contemplative practice is desirable and has the potential to enhance service delivery and improve the quality of interventions with families and children. It is, however, also important to consider the existence of what might be considered unreflective practice, or what Thompson (2008) describes as 'mindless' rather than 'mindful' practice. Evidence of unreflective practice is very starkly demonstrated in the numerous inquiry reports undertaken in Ireland and the UK to investigate the death or abuse of children known to statutory child protection services, for example, the (*Serious Case Review - Baby Peter*, 2009; Health Service Executive, 2010 *Roscommon Child Care Case*). Buckley et al. (2013) highlight the fact that since the 1990s there has been twenty-nine inquiries and reviews in Ireland in relation to concerns about child protection services which, for the most part, report systems and practice deficits.

There have been similar inquiries in the United Kingdom. Evidence of professional malpractice, negligence, and the absence of reflective practice have been found in these cases. Such inquiry reports have repeatedly demonstrated the presence of non-

contemplative and unreflective practice by practitioners across a range of practice issues.

As noted by White et al. (2008) in section one of this chapter, social work practice is characterised by complexity, uncertainty and risk. Engaging in reflective practice is therefore a concept that can potentially assist practitioners to be more thoughtful and contemplative and enable them to make more informed practice decisions through the use of the reflective process. Accounts from practitioners in this research study regarding their use of reflective practice would support this view.

#### ***7.4 The value of reflective practice***

The concept of reflective practice enjoys unequivocal support from the overwhelming majority of practitioners and managers who participated in this study. Practitioner accounts were emphatic about the positive value of using reflective practice. During baseline and follow-up interviews, all practitioners indicate that they use the reflective approach in the context of their practice and endorse its use. However, for the purposes of discussing the perceived merits and value of the reflective process (from the perspective of practitioners), it is relevant to consider both the general and the more tangible benefits that practitioners describe in their accounts. Practitioner accounts incorporate a general value regarding their use of reflective practice. For example, practitioners describe a reflective thought process that enables them to rationalize and consider presenting situations and practice scenarios; this enables them to consider their actions in dealing with these issues. Practitioners therefore, by their own accounts, derive self-assurance and confidence regarding their actions and decisions made as a result of engaging in the reflective process.

The different modes of reflective practice facilitate varied levels of reflection e.g. formal, informal, reflection with a critical friend, or the use of reflective practice in a supportive structured environment. It can be argued that this varied or eclectic use of the reflective process is valued by practitioners as the process enables different approaches to engagement with reflection, for example, through the use of a written reflective journal, in the context of formal supervision, or with a critical friend. Practitioners in

the study express the view that they value mulling over, contemplating and considering what one is doing and why. Engaging in the reflective process facilitates self-reasoning and allows a practitioner the space to make informed decisions. This general value is clearly a specific benefit which supports practitioners in fulfilling their professional task, and is a main reason why they report positively regarding their use of this reflective methodology.

In addition, practitioner accounts further demonstrate more tangible benefits identified by them regarding their use of the reflective approach. Practitioners cited, for example, a number of specific practice examples where using reflective practice supported their work and resulted in enhancement in their practice. These identified benefits included improved practice and knowledge development achieved through reflective learning. Specifically, practitioners described using the reflective process to evaluate their work and focus on aspects of their practice that were effective. In addition, the development of heightened professional awareness was highlighted as a specific benefit resulting from the use of reflective practice. Some examples were cited by practitioners who employed the reflective practice to avoid any tendency on their part to “blame families” and to heighten their awareness around the potential impact they can have, as professionals child care practitioners, on families. Using reflective practice was also considered beneficial by practitioners in checking their manner of working and engaging with families - this was felt to be particularly valuable in avoiding them being judgmental. Furthermore, the value of using the reflective approach to deal with work related anxiety and stress was also identified as a specific dividend resulting from using the reflective approach. Some practitioners referred to their use of reflective practice being beneficial in addressing more complex cases such as child protection or neglect cases or when they had to make decisions to bring children into care. Practitioners describe using the reflective approach as a mechanism to enable them to think over specific practice events and to learn from these situations, including mistakes made by them, and to enhance their professional development and practice as a result. The multiple benefits identified by practitioners in this study pertaining to their use of reflective practice are largely consistent with the literature relating to the use of the

reflective methodology (Hargreaves, 2013; Bolton, 2010; Knott et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2008; Taylor, 1998).

Practitioners in this study assert the positive impact upon their practice and professional development that results from the use of the reflective process. Learning from reflective experience and building on good practice achieved is a progressive and ongoing process. It is apparent in practitioner accounts that the use of reflective practice has in many instances, translated into practitioners doing something different and better as a result of applying the reflective approach. The reflective methodology is therefore considered by practitioners to be a variable in bringing about positive change to practice and in how practitioners design and deliver practice interventions whilst working with families. These findings in relation to the reported value of using reflective practice concur with existing extensive literature in this area. Fook et al. (2013) contend that the use of reflective practice is now considered a necessary ingredient in delivering effective professional practice. While Munro (2011), highlighting the value of the reflective approach, calls for reflection to be incorporated into the everyday practice of all child care practitioners. Similarly, Finlay (2008, p.2) comments that reflection is often seen as the bedrock of professional identity.

### ***7.5 The value of using a structured approach while engaging in reflective practice***

The research design employed in this study, and in particular the use of an action research component, provided an opportunity to explore reflective practice in two practice environments. In the first of these practice settings the reflective approach was used in the context of a structured action research group process. Alternatively, in the second practice setting practitioners used reflective practice in the context of an unstructured individual and what might be considered more regular practice environment. The use of an action research component facilitated a comparative analysis of both practice settings and enabled insights to be gained into how practitioners applied reflective practice in these different practice environments. The experience of practitioners who participated in the action research group were collated by reviewing

minutes of action research meetings held, and from memos retained by myself, and through my own observations as a co-researcher in the process. The views of practitioners from both groupings were obtained through collating baseline and follow-up interviews.

Using an action research approach provided an opportunity to implement the reflective methodology with a focus on assessing the use and effectiveness of a particular reflective model (Johns model). The use of this approach further facilitated the development of a research project that could evaluate the effectiveness of using the reflective approach in a structured practice setting. The use of reflective practice in applying the action research process is an essential aspect of the framework (Coghlan et al 2010; McIntosh, 2010; Reason and Bradbury, 2010; Hart et al., 2008). Furthermore, as Reason and Bradbury (2010, p.1) highlight, there is a pivotal link between the use of reflection and action research which “...*seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others...*”

It is evident from the varying levels of engagement by these two research groups that the practitioners who applied the reflective process in the context of a supportive structured environment were more proactive and involved in using the reflective approach compared to those practitioners who used the approach in an unstructured setting. Practitioners themselves asserted that having a supportive structure created a reflective space and opportunity for them to participate and apply the reflective approach. There were markedly different levels of engagement evident in both groupings. For example, the majority of practitioners in the action research group did embrace and use the Johns model while they also retained and used their reflective journals. The research evidence in this study suggests that having a structure to encourage practitioners to reflect may have been a significant factor in facilitating and supporting the more effective use of reflective practice. Supporting this contention, the value of having a supportive practice infrastructure and setting is acknowledged within action research literature. In addition, the importance of harnessing research relationships and the collaboration of research participants is also considered a cornerstone of the action research process (Hart et al.,

2008). The benefits of using reflective practice in a supportive structure were enhanced by the availability of collegial support while being part of the group. This factor engendered a group dynamic that fostered an individual compulsion to participate and contribute to the reflective process. There was evidence of a high level of commitment to participate and contribute to each identified problem area by participants in the action research setting, which again demonstrates the positive influence of the group structure. This level of engagement may also support the idea that being involved in a more structured practice environment engenders a discipline or obligation to contribute and be involved in the reflective process. The use of structure also appeared to lend itself to more focused and productive reflection. This was evidenced by the level of problem-solving activity that unfolded and the volume of issues that were reflected upon and which resulted in positive solutions being developed. As noted by Reason and Bradbury (2010, p.2), the action research process places a focus on working towards practical outcomes.

The experiences of practitioners not using the reflective approach within a supportive structure was quite different. There was, for example, a high level of non-engagement and non-use of the reflective process evident within this group. The vast majority of practitioners in the non-action research group did not use the Johns model, nor did they use their reflective journals. There was no evidence of a reflective dynamic by any individual practitioner in this group regarding their use of reflective practice. Practitioners were largely left to their own devices and did not have the supportive collegial influence which was evident in the structured action research environment. Practitioners' accounts show evidence that using reflective practice in a supportive structured environment is more beneficial and results in a more productive and effective use of the reflective approach, essentially rendering the reflective process a more valuable exercise and a more productive activity.

The use of an action research approach also demonstrates that practitioners will, within a supported structure, more routinely and effectively use reflective practice. This finding represents a significant point of learning in the context of this research study. As

illustrated by the non-engagement of the overwhelming majority of practitioners in the non-action research group, providing practitioners with reflective theory and tools alone is not sufficient to promote engagement with the process. Using the action research methodology illustrates that in order to maximise benefits from the use of reflective practice, the process needs to be aligned to, and embedded within, a structured framework. Practitioners gain collegial support, engage in collective problem-solving, and involvement in the process appears to engender a sense of group cohesion in addressing presenting issues. Furthermore, the application of reflective practice in the context of the action research framework creates a reflective space and encourages the use of reflective practice.

### ***7.6 Theory-based reflective practice***

There is consensus in the literature that theory-informed practice is fundamental to the effective delivery of the social work/social care task. As noted by Coulshed (2012, p.3) there is now a universal acceptance that a research basis for social work practice is necessary. Moreover, the governing associations of the social work profession explicitly assert that this profession draws on specific theories of human behaviour and social systems to analyse and inform their professional role. Dolan et al. (2006) further assert the importance of theory in the context of family support and identify social support theory as a linchpin underpinning this approach. Gray et al. (2009, p.5), in further emphasizing the importance of theory-based practice, suggest that without theory the social work profession would only have 'dogma'.

Reinforcing the importance of theory in the context of social care provision and relating this to specific practice, Trevithick (2005) notes the use of a theoretical approach illuminates practice and enables practitioners to make sense of their work. It also helps them to explain interventions to families and other allied professions. Brookfield (1995), in addition, notes that practice viewed through the lens of theory can help practitioners name practice and locate it in a social context. Thompson (2000) observes that theory-based practice is important because it is linked to formal knowledge which can be tested. Child care practice, as illustrated by practitioner accounts in this research study,

necessitates that difficult decisions sometimes need to be made to address complex and unpredictable situations and to keep children safe. Employing a theoretical approach can therefore provide an empirical knowledge base to inform practice and support and enable practitioners to defend their practice when necessary, for example, in the context of legal proceedings, or where high risk situations necessitate immediate intervention.

Practitioner accounts in this study suggest that there is an absence of theoretical knowledge and a limited understanding amongst the majority of practitioners in relation to the theoretical concept of reflective practice. Deficits in theoretical knowledge are apparent in levels of conceptual perspicacity pertaining to the reflective concept amongst research participants. In other words, practitioner accounts explaining their understanding of reflective practice lack theoretical depth and are superficial in substance. For example, no practitioner makes reference to or identifies the importance of learning theory or the theoretical connection between learning theory and reflective practice. There was no substantive understanding evident in practitioner accounts linking the use of experiential learning to subsequent developmental change. Nor is there evidence of linking theory-informed reflective practice with more informed and knowledgeable practice.

It is therefore difficult to reconcile the level of positivity expressed by practitioners in relation to their stated level of theoretical knowledge and understanding regarding the reflective methodology. Practitioner accounts affirm that the overwhelming majority of practitioners in this study received no detailed theoretical or conceptual training in relation to reflective practice. The issue of training will be addressed in more detail in a later section of this chapter. However, given the absence of training, it is not unreasonable to question the level of conceptual understanding that practitioners possess in relation to the reflective methodology and process. Reinforcing this point, it was apparent during interviews with practitioners that the majority struggled to articulate a working definition of the reflective concept. There was no reference made by any practitioner to a conceptual framework being used, nor was there reference to a theoretical approach informing practice. The absence of conceptual knowledge raises

the broader question as to why practitioners would endorse a process in which they had not been adequately trained and do not fully comprehend.

If the reflective process is not fully understood by practitioners, in terms of the theoretical and conceptual dimensions and meaning that applies to the approach, a further question arises then as to how practitioners can claim to be using reflective practice. Smyth (1992) notes how maintaining a notional understanding of reflective practice can result in the concept having multiple meanings applied to its use. Thompson (2008) further observes that a tendency can prevail among practitioners to adopt an over-simplified and superficial approach to describing the concept of reflective practice. These over-simplified accounts do not adequately capture the inherent theoretical and conceptual meaning of the reflective approach. Thompson also highlights that engaging in effective reflective practice is not simply about pausing for thought, but rather about learning and making connections between thinking and doing (Thompson, 2008, p.10).

A number of possible explanations can be considered to account for the disparities in relation to the levels of understanding and use pertaining to the reflective process. It is possible that practitioners, due to the absence of adequate training, simply do not understand the reflective methodology and the theoretical approach which underpins it. Alternatively, it is possible that some practitioners view the idea of reflective practice as an atheoretical entity. In other words, practitioners view reflective practice as a common sense activity, one which most people engage in as a matter of course or a process that naturally unfolds. There is a certain validity to this interpretation. It can, for example, be reasonably inferred that most people think about, contemplate, review and reflect on daily events without considering this process to be 'reflective practice'. As noted by Rolfe et al. (2011, p.4), "we all reflect and we do it often..." This type of day-to-day reflection is an intrinsic part of human experience. However, there are distinct differences between what is understood by the term 'reflective practice' in the literature, in the context of child care practice and indeed in the context of this research study. Even though they do not name it as such, practitioner accounts in this research have evidenced a theoretical reflective approach in use. This application of the reflective

practice unpacks practice and gains new learning and understanding about the professional task in hand through the process of experiential professional learning. However, it is acknowledged that having a recognizable theoretical basis to child care practice is an essential component in the effective use of reflective practice, Fook et al., (2013). This point is further reinforced by Payne (2014, p. 79) who observes that... “reflection helps to develop practice theories for professionals: they use the ideas inspired by reflection on particular incidents to adapt existing theories or create new ones”. This is important both to inform and guide practice and to provide a rationale for action and subsequent interventions. Equally, having a theoretical basis distinguishes reflective practice as a conceptual entity and demarcates the reflective methodology from the more routine daily contemplation and reflection in which people may engage.

### ***7.7 Deficits in the use of reflective practice***

A number of deficits are identified in this study pertaining to levels of understanding and use of the reflective approach in particular areas of child care practice. These deficits lie in areas of knowledge and practice where one would reasonably expect the reflective process to be understood and applied. Focusing on the specific deficits in question, it was apparent during interviews that, in relation to the application of reflective practice, no practitioner made reference to using the reflective process in the areas of assessment, relationship-based practice, or in relation to critical reflective practice. There were also evident deficits in relation to the use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision.

#### ***7.7.1 Assessment and reflective practice***

The importance of undertaking comprehensive assessments in child care practice has been highlighted within the current social work literature (Gray et al., 2012; Wilson, et al.2008; Buckley, 2006; Trevithick, 2005). As Lishman (2007) further illustrates, the central task of child care social workers is to evaluate areas of risk, uncertainty and need. Assessment must therefore be the cornerstone of social work intervention and inform practitioners regarding the needs of presenting families. In reviewing child protection services in the United Kingdom, Munro (2011) reinforces the need for

thorough and ongoing assessments to assist child care practitioners in appropriately identifying need, and designing effective interventions to protect children and support families. However, as Buckley (2006) observes, many of the recent child death and child abuse inquiries in Ireland have repeatedly highlighted deficits in the assessment process as being a contributing factor inhibiting child care professionals in discharging their role and function to protect children. More recently, the *Roscommon Child Care Case* (2010) specifically identifies deficits in the assessment process and other areas as contributing to the subsequent inaction and ineffective response by child protection practitioners. Similarly, recent child death inquiry reports in the United Kingdom have also identified inadequate and flawed assessments, particularly in relation to identifying risk, by professionals as being an influential contributing factor to children not being protected (The Victoria Climbié Inquiry, 2003; Serious Case Review: Baby Peter, 2009).

There is reference within the current literature linking the use of reflective practice to the area of assessment. Munro (in Gray et al., 2012) recognises the cognitive and intuitive dimensions involved in the assessment process, and observes that analytical thinking is an important variable in any assessment approach. Knott et al. (2007) note how practitioners engage in reflection-in-action when undertaking the assessment process. Wilson et al. (2008) further highlight the importance of the assessment process and how a thorough assessment can inform thinking and action. Wilson et al. (2008) further acknowledge the importance of practitioners adopting and maintaining a reflective stance during the assessment process. Coulshed et al. (2012) recognize the importance of the assessment process and link this process to communication, observation, reflection and evaluation. These variables are seen as core components of an effective assessment process. Furthermore, as noted by Thompson et al. (2008, p.137), the core task of social care practitioners is to make sense of complex situations and the ability to properly assess presenting information effectively. It involves gathering information, sifting it, weighting it up and making sense of often confusing and contradictory elements of knowledge. While there is some literature linking the use of reflective practice and assessment this link needs to be reinforced and propagated more effectively through in-depth research and empirical validation regarding the

importance of developing a reflective stance and perspective, particularly while engaging in the assessment process.

The importance of the assessment process is recognised by practitioners in this study in terms of identifying the needs of service users and guiding subsequent interventions. Each practitioner asserted during interview that they undertake an assessment whilst working with families referred to them. There is, however, no evidence of a single universal method of assessment being used by practitioners. Practitioner accounts suggest that a variety of different assessment models and frameworks are being used by them. More significantly, it is also notable that no practitioner made reference to using the reflective process during the period of assessment being undertaken by him/her. In outlining their use of the assessment, it is clear that practitioners who participated in this study adhere to a mechanistic approach to the area of assessment and do not appear to digress or delve into areas such as taking a detailed social history. The importance of using the reflective process, and making sense of a presenting situation, is not apparent in the descriptive accounts given by practitioners in this research study whilst outlining their use of assessment. Interpreting information necessitates reflection. The importance of engaging in analytical reflection is identified by Thompson (2008, p.35): *“It is in this sense that it is an important component of reflective practice. It involves drawing out recurring themes and issues and recognising patterns that help us form a meaningful picture of the situation”*.

Services users will present with complex and sometimes contradictory information which needs to be unravelled. Thompson (2008) further contends that methodical assessments must also incorporate the ability of practitioners to be flexible and digress beyond a set assessment scripts. Munro (2011) also highlights the need to employ analytical skill whilst undertaking an assessment: *“It needs to be allied to reflection - time and attention given to mulling over the experience and learning from it. This is best achieved through conversation with others, in supervision for example, or in discussion with colleagues”* (Munro Report: 2011, p.87)

Such reflective dimensions are absent from the account of assessment approaches described by practitioners in this study.

### ***7.7.2 Relationship-based practice and reflective practice***

The importance of developing and nurturing positive relationships in the context of social work and social care service provision is considered a key factor in the development of effective interventions (McGeown, 2000). Reiterating the importance of relationship-based practice, Bruner (in Dolan et al., 2006) also highlights the centrality and value of creating effective relationships and in the subsequent development of effective interventions with service users. Ruch (in Wilson et al., 2008) similarly reinforces the importance of relationship-based practice, but equally makes a direct connection in the development of these relationships and the use of reflective practice. Ruch also contends that there is an inextricable link between the skills and process required to develop effective relationships with service users and reflective practice. The importance of relationship-based practice, and the links made in the literature with incorporating a reflective dimension to develop and nurture these relationships is not evident in this research study. During interview, no practitioner made any reference to the importance of relationship-based practice or the central role of using reflective practice to guide and inform how to achieve such relationships. This gap in practice may be attributed to inadequate training and awareness regarding the use of reflective practice. It also highlights that practitioners need to have an informed theoretical understanding of the full potential of the reflective process in order to get the most from their use of the approach.

### ***7.7.3 Critical reflective practice***

A clear finding evident in this research study is the absence of critical reflection in the practice of research participants. This finding is informative and requires some further discussion in order to tease out the reasons why there is an absence in the use of critical reflective practice by practitioners. In addition, it is also pertinent to examine the potential implications of this absence for future social care practice. However, before

embarking upon any further deliberation regarding the absence of critical reflection, it is important to firstly reconsider what is meant by the term critical reflective practice.

Critical reflection offers a more through-going form of reflection through the use of critical theory (Brookfield, 1995). In addition, as noted by (Fook et al., 2006, p.41), critical reflection is a process for unearthing individually held assumptions in order to make changes to the social world. Demarcating further the distinction between reflective practice and critical reflective practice, it is noted by (Fook et al., 2006, p.9) that reflection on its own tends to “*remain at the level of relatively undisruptive changes in techniques or superficial thinking*”. Critical reflective practice on the other hand is informed by critical theory which is essentially an endeavour to enlighten and raise awareness regarding the humanistic nature of social structures and conditions (Comstock, 1994). Critical theory offers an analysis of society and aspires to positively transform and change society. Being a critically reflective practitioner, and incorporating a critical analytical perspective into practice, is therefore a potentially important aspect of practice, if one has ambitions to bring about social transformation and change. Some commentators have advanced the view that all reflection is critical (Thompson, 2008). While others contend that: “*Reflectiveness is a stage on the way to criticality. It is not sufficient to be reflective*”. (Adams et al., 2002, p.87). There is an emphasis within the critical theory perspective on promoting individual self-awareness and raising social consciousness regarding the unequal and socially constructed nature of society. The critical theory tradition holds that if underlying assumptions about the unjust nature of society can be unearthed within individual practitioners then positive change and social transformation may be possible (White et al., 2006; Fook et al., 2007; Brookfield, 1995).

Making a connection with the social work task, Thompson (1993) locates the centrality of critical reflection in the context of social work education and training. Further reinforcing the importance of incorporating a critical dimension with practice, the Irish Association of Social Workers contend, in their Code of Ethical Practice statement, that social work practice should be informed by an ethos and principles which are guided by

a critical theoretical orientation. This code of ethics recognises the constraints placed on individuals in society through poverty, inequality and discrimination. This association, supported by the European Federation of Social Workers, promotes the ideal of social change and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being. It should be noted that many of the standards of ethics, conduct and performance expected of social workers are common to all social care practitioners. This includes the pursuit of social justice, upholding human rights, challenging negative discrimination and unfair and unjust social policies (CORU, 2011). It can be argued that the incorporation of a critical theoretical dimension to social care practice, and the need to promote, for example, anti-discriminatory practice necessitates the development of critical reflection.

Having briefly reviewed the meaning of critical reflective practice and its location within the ethos of the social care profession, it is pertinent to consider the findings from this research study in relation to the reported use and relevance of this conceptual entity. Research findings indicate that the overwhelming majority of practitioners who participated in this research study were essentially unaware of critical reflection as a working concept. The idea of practice being informed or influenced by a critical theoretical perspective was not evident. Furthermore, it was apparent from practitioner accounts that engaging in or promoting critical reflection lacked meaning and importance and was not an area of their practice that was prioritized. There was no evidence of any deep seated social analysis taking place, questioning of assumptions or raising of awareness. Indeed the fundamental traits and characteristics that inform the use of critical reflection were not in evidence by practitioners in this study. In considering these findings and while endeavouring to employ a critical reflective lens to understand them, these findings could be interpreted as evidence of what is referred to within the critical theory literature as a prevailing level of 'false consciousness' ( Ritzer, 2000; Fay, 1987; Held, 1980; Freire, 1972; Agger, 2006). It could be argued also from a critical theoretical perspective that this absence of any semblance of critical analysis embeds the existing status quo and further enables the perpetuation of injustice and prevailing discrimination in society. In other words, lack of awareness negates the potential to effect change and sustains the status quo. Highlighting the role of critical

social work, Healy (2005, p.174) contends that: “... *critical social workers argue that social workers should raise the consciousness of the service user; that is, to help them see that the causes of the problems they face lie not in themselves but in unjust social structures*”. The clear implication for practice suggests that the absence of critical reflection among professionals will limit their awareness and level of consciousness to promote social change and their ability to challenge unjust social structures.

In considering further the lack of awareness and understanding evident among research participants in relation to critical reflective practice it can be suggested that the absence of training may have been a factor. The absence of training in relation to the overall reflective concept was a consistent finding in this study. This absence of training can also be directly linked to deficits in theoretical understanding among practitioners in relation to critical reflective practice. Alternatively, it is also possible that some practitioners may hold the view that engaging in critical reflective practice is not their role. However, it should be noted that this stance was not articulated by research participants in the study. From an organisational perspective there is no evidence to suggest that the Child and Family Agency - TUSLA, the main agency responsible for the delivery of child care services, either support or promote the use of critical reflection amongst child care staff. Indeed, it is questionable if social care practitioners, as official employees of the state, would be permitted to engage in any form of opposition to, for example, cost containment measures or cuts to services or budgets. Similarly, it would be an unlikely scenario to envisage social care workers protest about cuts to child benefit or lone parent allowance despite these measures having a severe impact on vulnerable members of society.

The absence of a critical perspective in social care practice has, as Fook et al. (2007) suggest, resulted in a missed opportunity to engage in a more through-going analysis of social disadvantage. Critical theory offers an alternative perspective and analysis, the absence of which may contribute to a lost opportunity to influence and bring about social transformation and change. It can be argued that the required praxis needed to initiate social change can only begin through a process of raising social consciousness

and awareness regarding the need to change the existing social order. This praxis holds that an alternative social system is possible - lack of awareness or the absence of an informed consciousness around issues of social disadvantage will negate the potential to initiate change. As noted by Brookfield (1995, p.26), in promoting the core values that underpin a critical theoretical orientation, *“Being anchored in values of justice, fairness and compassion, critical reflection finds its political representation in the democratic processes”*.

A further issue addressed through the lens of critical reflective practice is the concept of power. Critical reflective practice advances a perspective that recognises that power or domination is experienced at a personal level within society and, moreover, that this is socially constructed. This analysis of power and power relations within society is informed by the seminal work of Foucault (White et al., 2006; Gray et al., 2009) and is relevant to social work and social care provision in the context of the exercise of professional power and also in the context of professional relationships maintained with service users and indeed with other colleagues. As noted by White et al. (2006, p.44), *“... one of the functions of critical reflection is to enable awareness of one`s power ...”* Critical theory and the use of critical reflective practice places an emphasis on power dynamics and an awareness regarding the use of power, particularly in the context of professional relationships. The absence of critical awareness in relation to this area of practice represents, it can be argued, a practice deficit that can potentially result in power dynamics being an invisible element of professional practice.

It is evident in the findings from this research study that there is a lack of understanding and awareness regarding the area of critical reflective practice among research participants. This lack of awareness extends to levels of understanding regarding the critical reflective approach and an absence of any semblance of critical reflective practice on the part of practitioners. It is unclear why this lack of awareness prevails. However, lack of training and working in an organisational culture that does not promote or support the use of critical reflection may be variables that have contributed to this lack of understanding. As illustrated in this section it can be argued that the

absence of a critical perspective represents a theoretical gap in terms of this approach offering an alternative social analysis. The critical reflective perspective also provides an insightful analysis into particular areas related to practice such as power dynamic. This approach also puts forward the option to consider social transformation and change, and an approach that promotes a more egalitarian society.

#### ***7.7.4 The role of supervision and reflective practice***

The majority of practitioners who participated in this research study articulate the view that formal supervision represents an appropriate forum to enable practitioners to engage in reflective practice. Practitioners consider formal supervision to be an opportune location to discuss cases, review interventions, and a space to make reflective decisions on future case involvement. Practitioners further assert the view that formal supervision is a potentially appropriate forum for them to engage in reflection about their work and practice overall, in terms of their professional development. The appropriateness of including a reflective dimension to supervision is also supported by managers who endorse the use of the reflective approach. Indeed, some managers express the view that it is their professional role and responsibility to promote reflective practice as part of their supervisory duties.

The view expressed by practitioners and managers regarding the appropriateness of using and promoting reflective practice in formal supervision is consistent with the literature in this area. (Wilson et al., 2008; Role et al., 2011; Trevithick, 2005; Fook et al 2007; Morrison, 2005). As outlined in the literature review in Chapter Two, a number of commentators highlight the pivotal role of incorporating a reflective component in the context of supervision. For example, Morrison (2005) links the use of reflective practice in formal supervision directly to the subsequent practice learning process that unfolds in applying the approach. Indeed, Morrison promotes the Kolb reflective cycle to facilitate a reflective dimension to formal supervision. As highlighted by Pritchard (1995), it is also important that managers employ a reflective philosophy and approach in order to role-model and encourage practitioners to engage in ongoing reflective practice as

reflective supervision. It is argued that this practice produces reflective practice through case discussions and ongoing reflective learning.

Practitioner accounts in this research study also highlight an inconsistency regarding the use of reflective practice by managers in the context of formal supervision. Despite the positivity expressed by managers in relation to reflective practice, and their acknowledgement of the potential benefits that result from its use in the context of formal supervision, the overwhelming majority of practitioners in this study report that reflective practice is either not used in formal supervision, or is inconsistently applied by managers. This finding represents a contradiction in that supervisors in this study are quite articulate and assured of the multiple benefits which accrue from using reflective practice while not applying it in practice. It can be suggested that the absence of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision represents a missed opportunity to use the reflective methodology to enhance and improve practice. This omission essentially represents a barrier to reflective practice identified by practitioners in this study. The absence of reflective practice in the supervisory relationship is considered a prohibiting influence in the development and use of the approach by practitioners.

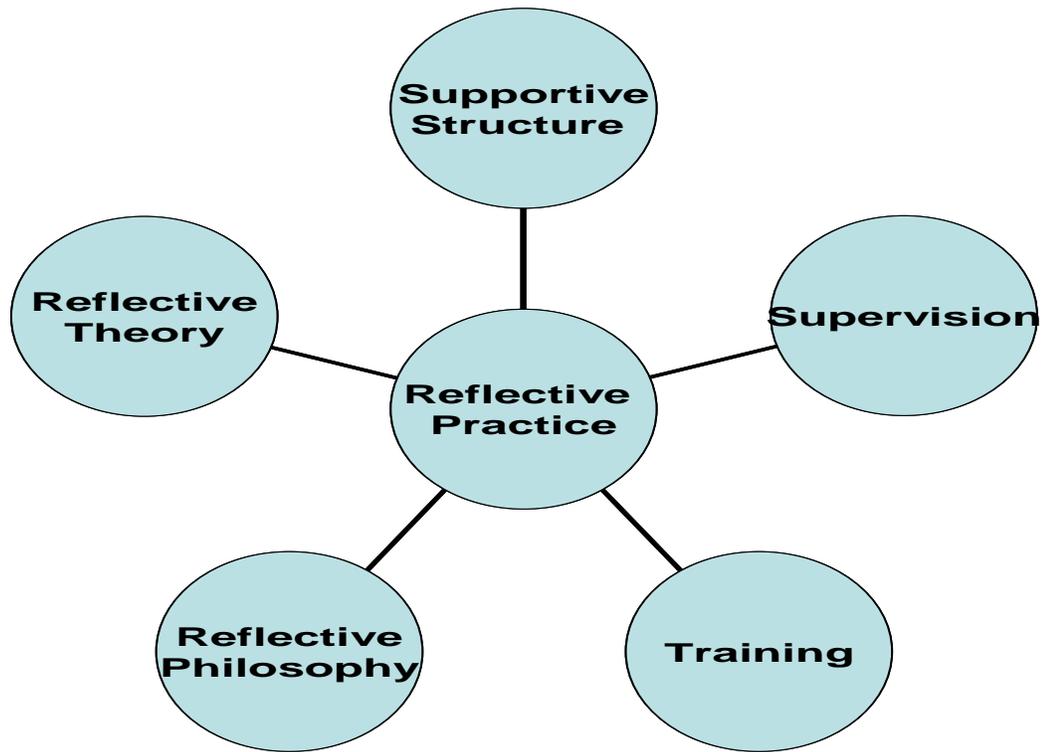
It can be argued that the inconsistent use of reflective practice by managers is related to inadequate and insufficient training. It can also be suggested that standards of practice in social work and child care heretofore have not been subject to scrutiny until the relatively recent introduction of the *Health Information and Quality Authority Standards* (2011). The Health Information and Quality Authority represent the statutory body who now inspect child care services and measure the quality of service provision against a set of national standards. The use of reflective practice in the delivery of services and in the context of formal supervision will now be imperative as the absence of reflective practice may be linked to issues of non-compliance with the HIQA standards.

### ***7.8 General model for implementing reflective practice***

In undertaking this exploratory study, it is evident from the empirical research data that systemic and strategic gaps exist regarding the effective implementation of the reflective

approach. These gaps relate to the absence of a joined-up integrated policy approach which incorporates links between theory, practice, training, supervision and the development of supportive structures to support the use of reflective practice. Other more strategic deficits are also highlighted in this study, particularly regarding the absence of necessary infrastructure to support the use of reflective practice. The importance of having such frameworks in place and the need to develop a supportive practice environment to nurture the reflective process is absent from the current literature. As outlined in Figure 22, in order to effectively support the use and implementation of reflective practice, a particular approach is required which incorporates theoretical, practical, training, and structural dimensions. This more integrated approach may result in the more effective use of the reflective methodology. The development of this cyclical reflective continuum and the specific components included in it, are characteristic of what is required at a structural level to implement effective reflective practice. This general model does, in effect, represent emergent learning from this research study. I will now further expand and discuss these salient issues in more detail.

**Figure 21: Integrated reflective framework**



### ***7.8.1 Supportive structure***

A clear finding emerging from this research study highlights the benefits of using a supportive reflective structure to encourage and motivate practitioners to actively engage in reflective practice. It is evident that research participants who were part of the action research grouping in this study were more proactive in their engagement and use of the reflective approach. Participants from the action research group presented as more motivated and dynamic regarding the level and extent to which they employ reflective practice. The presence of a supportive structured environment nurtured and encouraged the use of reflective practice by practitioners in this group. This practice environment further engendered collegial support that assisted each practitioner while also promoting collective reflection also. Research participants who did not have the supportive structure or collegial dynamic and support evident in the action research group were less inclined to engage in reflective practice and were essentially less reflective. The development of supportive reflective structures should therefore be developed in order

to promote and support practitioners in their endeavours to engage in reflective practice. Frameworks such as the action research structures would be a viable and transferable option to achieve this.

### ***7.8.2 Supervision and reflective practice***

Findings from this research study have identified gaps in the use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision. As noted by Morrison (2005), reflective practice is a key element of the supervisory process to assist practitioners to utilise their existing knowledge and skills and to support practitioners in their continuous professional learning and development. Moreover, the use of reflective practice in the context of formal supervision acts as a support forum to enable practitioners to discuss, unpack and review challenges and difficulties associated with the social care task. Practitioner and manager accounts in this research study place a value on engaging in reflective practice in the context of formal supervision. However, the empirical reality is that the reflective element of the supervisory process is not being used to its full potential. The provision of formal supervision should therefore incorporate and actively promote the inclusion of reflective practice. The provision of reflective supervision should be part of a supportive reflective framework and permeate organisational culture in supporting front-line child care practitioners.

### ***7.8.3 Training and reflective practice***

A clear finding emerging from this research study is the absence of adequate training for practitioners and managers in relation to the concept and methodology of reflective practice. Nineteen out of twenty practitioners interviewed report that they had received no formal training in relation to reflective practice either in college, university, or in relation to work-based training programmes. While a caveat should be added that the majority of the practitioners in the research study had graduated from third level education between ten and fifteen years prior to this study, this is still a surprising finding given the emphasis placed on the importance of demonstrating the 'reflective' ability in social work and nursing programmes (Ixer, 1999; Johns, 2000). Thompson (2008) points out that engaging in reflective practice, and demonstrating a competence

in this area are considered as a course requirement in social work training programmes. Nevertheless, the reported experience of practitioners in this research study highlights that they received no formal training regarding the subject. It is not then surprising that the level of conceptual and theoretical understanding evident amongst practitioners in this research study is limited.

The importance of practitioners receiving appropriate training in relation to the practical application of the reflective process represents a gap in the current literature (Knott et al., 2007; Rolfe et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2008; Redmond, 2006). While there is a substantial body of descriptive literature in relation to reflective practice, the importance of providing appropriate training to equip practitioners and managers to be reflective and to highlight the requisite reflective skills required to undertake this task is much less available in the existing body of literature. To fully understand the reflective methodology, practitioners need to comprehend the process involved. This process requires practitioners/managers to have the required skills and an awareness of the various reflective models available which can assist with the reflective process. It is also important for practitioners/managers to have an awareness of their own capacity to be reflective. This understanding of reflective practice includes practitioners having a conceptual comprehension coupled with being able to make links with experiential learning and subsequent practice enhancement. The absence of adequate training for practitioners and managers may also have the potential to create dangers and risks. For example, in this research study practitioners appear to have developed their own notional understanding of what constitutes reflective practice. Engaging in effective reflective practice involves self-monitoring and may also involve acknowledging deficits and mistakes in practice and addressing personal vulnerabilities. These can be challenging issues to confront. There is the potential danger that without proper training and reflective supervision, practitioners may not identify ineffective practice or poor decisions made because of ineffective or misguided reflection.

Managers who have not received adequate training in relation to reflective practice may also encounter potential difficulties. For example, managers are frequently tasked with

de-briefing staff after they have been involved in difficult or challenging situations. These situations can include supporting staff who have dealt with a traumatic child abuse investigation or where staff have had to support children and parents in the context of out-of-home placements. Practitioners can present as vulnerable and sensitive as a result of their involvement in such cases. Managers need to be tactful and empathetic and should be able to reassure practitioners while also reflectively working through the issues and resolving them. However, if these difficult situations are left unresolved, or the proper reflective methodology is not used, there is the potential for practitioners to be left unsupported and vulnerable. Some practitioners express the view that managers need to place value on the use of reflective practice and should be better equipped to guide and support child care staff in their use of the reflective methodology. As outlined in the (Section 6.4) of this chapter, reflective practice should be a pivotal aspect of formal supervision. Managers should be trained to facilitate and nurture the reflective process. In order to implement a key policy - the *Agenda for Children's Service - A Policy Handbook* (2007), policy makers, senior managers, line managers and practitioners all need to be adequately trained in the use of the reflective process.

The provision of adequate training in relation to reflective practice is important. However, in order to effectively engage in the reflective process and accrue benefit from the approach, practitioners need to have an openness to acknowledge and address potential short-comings in their practice. This may include acknowledging professional flaws and mistakes made. Some practitioners may not be open to engage in the reflective process or may have a reluctance or resistance to using the approach. Alternatively, some practitioners may also adopt a more cynical approach and maintain a negative perception of the reflective process. This attitude was evident during the action research process. As highlighted in Chapter Six, one practitioner who attended the action research group sessions experienced a negative reaction from work colleagues in respect of his attendance. Colleagues were negative and dismissive in relation to the notion of reflective practice and unsupportive regarding his attendance at the action research meetings. Similarly, another example from the research study illustrates the issue of internal practitioner capacity and a lack of openness to engage in reflection. In

this example the practitioner, who was a non-action research participant, minimizes the importance of reflective practice by suggesting that the concept is over-stated and that everyone does it anyway. It could be argued that if a practitioner has this disposition towards reflective practice as a methodology then it is likely that he/she will not be open to embrace the approach. Evidence highlighting negativity by practitioners towards the use of the reflective process was minimal in this research study. However, this issue does bring a focus on the importance of practitioners recognising the value of the technique as a means to improve and enhance their professional practice and there being a professional responsibility on them to achieve best practice through reflection and learning.

#### ***7.8.4 Reflective philosophy and policy context***

In discussing the use of reflective practice, consideration should be given to the factors that help embed and sustain the application of the reflective approach. I suggest that the use of reflective practice is ultimately the dual responsibility of, firstly, each individual practitioner, to ensure they apply reflective practice to enhance and improve their individual practice, and secondly, child care organisations, as employers, to nurture the reflective process through supportive structures and appropriate reflective supervision. The presence of particular supportive factors may influence the organic development of the reflective approach. One such factor is the existence of an overarching reflective philosophy evident in modes of practice and embedded in prevailing social policy. I would contend that the existence of a reflective philosophy is a prerequisite to the effective development of reflective practice and an important variable in perpetuating the transformative application of the reflective approach across the diverse spheres of child care service provision.

For example, family support as a mode of practice incorporates a reflective philosophy through the integrated application of specific practice principles (Dolan et al., 2006). These practice principles are underpinned by a particular reflective philosophy which values inclusivity, participation and working in a spirit of partnership. This overarching guiding philosophy can influence the outlook practitioners bring to practice and guide

how they work and interact with service users and other professionals. Being cognisant of children`s rights, ensuring the voice of the child is heard and designing service interventions that are strengths-based and built on a model of partnership are practice issues that can be influenced by a prevailing reflective philosophy such as the approach informing family support practice. This approach is an example of an effective practice philosophy that can positively influence practice.

The social policy context is an important arena that has the potential to influence and inform practice. I therefore contend that having an inherent reflective philosophy informing policy would support the development of reflective practice by instilling a reflective outlook and approach in the context of practice. One example of this is exemplified in the *Agenda for Children`s Services Policy Handbook* (2007). This policy represents an approach which places an emphasis on a ‘whole child’ perspective and promotes the development of enhanced interagency co-operation and communication as a central objective. This policy document is explicitly reflective and, indeed, sets out fifty-seven reflective questions directed at policy-makers, managers and front-line practitioners. This policy document clearly incorporates a reflective philosophy and expressly supports the use of the reflective approach. This particular policy document was not properly launched when first published in 2007 and, as a result, was not effectively embedded into practice in order to influence practice and contribute to instilling a reflective philosophy. *Better Outcomes - Brighter Futures*, (2014) is another example of a policy document that seeks, through the co-ordination of government policy, to bring a reflective focus to five specific areas which have the potential to improve outcomes for service users. This policy promotes parental support, early intervention, children`s rights, and engenders the need for ongoing reflection to ensure these policy objectives are achieved.

### ***7.8.5 Reflective Theory***

As outlined earlier in this chapter the concept of reflective practice is embedded within a specific theoretical framework informed by learning theory. The importance of theory, and adopting an evidence-based approach to professional practice in the context of

social work practice, is widely acknowledged within the literature (Gray et al., 2009; Knott et al., 2007; Healy, 2005; Trevithick, 2005; Coulshed, 2012). The deficits identified in this research study suggest that practitioners, largely due to inadequate training, are uninformed or unaware of the theory-base which informs reflective practice. Furthermore, there is evidence in practitioner accounts of an almost complete absence of any critical reflection by practitioners in relation to the broader social context. Providing practitioners with adequate training and theoretical knowledge regarding the use of reflective and critical reflective practice is therefore a fundamental prerequisite to the development of informed reflective practice

### ***Summary***

Practitioners who deliver front-line services are presented with case scenarios which may be complex, uncertain and may involve risk. Practitioners therefore need to employ a reflective, contemplative approach, and have an openness to learn from every experience. This research study has very clearly illustrated the many benefits that practitioners derive from their use of reflective practice. These benefits enhance and improve practice and contribute to the development of more knowledgeable professionals. Indeed, it can be argued that engaging in reflective practice is an imperative in the context of such important work. This research study has demonstrated the added value of employing reflective practice in the context of using a supportive structured environment such as that provided through the use of action research. The advantages of developing supportive practice environments may be a key driver in the promotion and use of the reflective approach. In undertaking this exploratory research study, a number of deficits have also been identified, illustrating how the concept of reflective practice is not being used to its fullest potential. These deficits in practice relate to essential areas of child care service provision. Such gaps in practice need to be addressed through the use of more effective training and implementation of the reflective approach. Finally, a global model for the future use of the reflective methodology is proposed which incorporates the learning from this research study, and which endeavours to promote a more effective, enduring and consistent application of reflective practice going forward.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

### ***Introduction***

This exploratory research study has examined the concept of reflective practice. While there is a considerable volume of literature available regarding this area of practice, little empirical research has been undertaken that has validated its use, effectiveness or practice value. This research study has addressed this gap in the research literature and adds to the existing body of knowledge by considering the applied use and perceived value of the reflective approach from the perspective of practitioners. This qualitative study has also considered how practitioners understand the concept of reflective practice and the various methods of applying the approach in day-to-day practice. This study has further explored the enabling and prohibitive factors that may influence the use of the reflective approach. Findings from this study have highlighted areas of deficit in the use of reflective practice. Moreover, findings from this study have indicated that reflective practice is not being used to its fullest potential. Finally, this exploratory study has concluded that to achieve the optimum use of the reflective approach then the process needs to be applied in the context of a structured practice environment similar to that employed when using the action research approach.

### ***8. Background and rationale for Study***

The nature of child care practice particularly in the areas of statutory child protection, family support and engaging with children and young people placed in the care system can be complex and uncertain. Child care practitioners who work in these practice domains come into contact with families and young people who are vulnerable and in most instances experiencing adversity in their lives. Practitioners encounter issues pertaining to child protection and the assessment of risk that require effective intervention. Engaging with families and young people necessitates that practitioners are professionally competent and can employ a wide range of knowledge and skills to assist

them work effectively with service users. Practitioners, therefore, need to exhibit sharp analytical skills in order to weigh-up and assess a presenting situation and develop an appropriate and effective intervention to assist and support families while ensuring that children are safe. Practitioners need to be self-assured and confident to make difficult but informed decisions. Child care practitioners also need to be adept at developing and nurturing relationship-based approaches to their work with families and young people. Engaging, therefore, in reflective, contemplative and thoughtful practice informed by ongoing experiential learning and acquired practice knowledge should be a professional imperative guiding such professional work.

There is a substantive body of existing literature regarding the reflective concept. This literature incorporates an overarching consensus that the theoretical concept of reflective practice is a positive practice entity and that using the approach can assist practitioners achieve refinement in their practice and overall enhancement in their professional ability. Employing a reflective approach has been linked in the literature with a wide range of practice benefits including problem-solving, improved professional skills and knowledge, identifying gaps in learning, raising awareness and to support practitioners in dealing with work related anxiety and stress. In addition, the use of reflective practice is considered a valuable tool in the area of assessment and has been linked to professional refinement in the development of analytical skills. Moreover, the use of reflective practice is specifically linked in the literature to assisting practitioners in the development of effective relationship-based practice. Commentators who endorse the importance of using a reflective methodology also identify the practice gains that can be achieved through the use of the reflective approach in the context of supervision and the ongoing professional development of practitioners through this reflective forum. Using reflective practice in the context of formal supervision is also considered a supportive mechanism to assist practitioners in dealing with emotional pressures and areas of work related stress inherent in the discharge of child care service provision.

Despite the multiple benefits that are perceived to accrue from using reflective practice there is relatively little empirical research available evidencing or validating the

effectiveness of using the approach. Indeed, a number of observers have critiqued the reflective concept because of the absence of empirical evidence substantiating the existence and value of the methodology. This research study seeks to address this gap in knowledge and empirical research regarding the concept of reflective practice. Furthermore, this research study facilitated a subjective exploration of the theoretical concept and the practical application of how the approach is implemented by practitioners. This study further presents new knowledge and understanding, from the perspective of practitioners and service managers, regarding the reflective concept, and considers the benefits that accrue from its use. Moreover, this research study has provided new understanding regarding the effectiveness of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment and how the reflective approach can be employed to its optimum use in this practice setting..

### ***8.1 Research Methodology***

This research study was informed by an overarching qualitative approach and research design. I employed methodological triangulation in addressing the research questions and objectives of the study. Using this approach enabled me to undertake a deep exploration of diverse sources of data. Specifically, open-ended interviews were used by way of a baseline and follow-up schedule with research participants (for example of baseline interview schedule - see Appendix T). This approach enabled the researcher to obtain a rich and diverse range of perspectives in relation to the subject matter. In total, fifty interviews were undertaken by the researcher during the course of the study. An action research component was also employed as part of the overall research design. Using this approach was appropriate in the context of this study for a number of reasons. For example, using an action research methodology enabled the researcher to observe practitioners implement a specific model of reflective practice and equally observe practitioners use reflective journals. Employing action research created an opportunity for the researcher to witness problems and barriers encountered by practitioners in their endeavours to employ reflective practice. Using action research further allowed the researcher to observe and evaluate the benefits of using the reflective process to problem-solve presenting issues through the use of reflective practice. The use of action

research was particularly insightful in relation to enabling the researcher to observe the benefits of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment while witnessing the reflective approach being employed by practitioners to resolve specific problem areas.

In undertaking this research study a considerable volume of data was obtained from various sources. A Grounded Theory approach was employed to gather, assimilate and categorize this data. Using a Grounded Theory approach enabled an in-depth scrutiny and analysis of data collated. This iterative and systematic process enabled an incisive interrogation of the data. Through a further process of constant comparative analysis I was able to interpret and make sense of the data in addressing the overarching research questions and the aims and objectives of the research study. In addition to using a Grounded Theory approach to collate data I also employed the Nvivo data storage and retrieval software. This software package enabled me to systematically arrange and categorize data into identifiable themes and trends. This systematic banking and sorting of data into manageable sections assisted the further systematic analysis and subsequent interpretation on this data.

## ***8.2 Findings from the research study - The benefits of using reflective practice***

In addressing the over-arching research question underpinning this study findings support the contention that multiple benefits accrue from the use of reflective practice. Findings from this study suggest that the benefits of using reflective practice are directly linked to experiential learning as a result of applying the reflective approach. Findings from this study identify a number of specific benefits that result from using reflective practice in the following areas:

- Identifying gaps in professional knowledge and knowledge development
- Enhancement of practice skills following reflection
- Problem-solving
- Experiential learning as a result of reflection.
- Raised professional awareness

- Applying theory to practice
- Positive changes to practice following reflection
- Supporting practitioners in dealing with work related anxiety and stress

These findings regarding the value of using reflective practice are representative of the view of the overwhelming majority of practitioners and managers who participated in the research study. These findings are essentially confirmatory regarding the value of using reflective practice. These findings are consistent also with the literature and validate many of the benefits that are associated with the use of reflective practice. This research study has highlighted that while practitioners may not fully understand the theoretical basis upon which reflective practice is based they still, nonetheless, engage in different forms of reflective practice and perceive the process to be helpful and beneficial regarding their practice

### ***8.3 Barriers to the use of reflective practice***

Practitioners identified a range of barriers which they felt prohibited them from using the reflective approach. The most predominant barrier identified was the issue of ‘time’ and practitioners asserting that they were too busy and could not factor in time or space for regular or consistent self-reflection. This factor was also linked by some practitioners to having busy caseloads. This issue was particularly related to social work practitioners. The issue of time as a barrier is difficult to reconcile with the value that the overwhelming majority of practitioners placed on using the reflective approach and the reported benefits they derived from its use. Furthermore, as noted by Thompson (2008, p.8) “... a key underlying principle of reflective practice is the busier we are, the more reflective we need to be. That is the more under pressure we are, the more each of us needs to be thinking clearly and carefully about”. Nevertheless the issue of time and work pressure was a consistently reported prohibiting factor preventing practitioners from engaging in reflective practice. Some practitioners also made reference to them being hesitant or fearful of addressing practice issues through the process of reflection, where they might be criticized. This issue was also linked to there being a reluctance to engage in the reflective process with supervisors where there was a perceived lack of

trust or where it was felt that supervisors were not adequately trained in the reflective process. In some instances it was also highlighted that reflective practice was not always included in formal supervision where, according to the broad literature, the reflective relationship and process should take place.

#### ***8.4 Findings from the research study -The area of training***

A clear finding emerging from this research study is the absence of adequate training for practitioners and managers in relation to the concept of reflective practice. This finding is evident in assertions made by the overwhelming majority of practitioners who participated in this research study. The majority of practitioners reported that they had not received any formal training regarding the reflective process. Practitioners have identified and acknowledged this gap in their practice and view the absence of training as a barrier prohibiting their effective use of the reflective methodology. Practitioners contend that the provision of training in the use of reflective practice would enhance their theoretical understanding and their knowledge in respect of the mechanics of applying the reflective methodology. A further gap in relation to the specific training of managers and their use of reflective practice was also identified in the research study. In order to fully support practitioners in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities and to support practitioners in the area of professional development, managers need to understand the reflective process and how it is applied in the context of formal supervision.

#### ***8.5 Findings from the research study - The impact and influence of structure***

A clear finding apparent in undertaking this research study is the positive influence and impact of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment. The use of an action research component in the study created such a structured environment, and, as a result, enabled practitioners to use reflective practice in the context of this structured framework. It is evident from the findings in this study and from assertions made by practitioners who participated in the action research group that a number of identified advantages and benefits result from using a more structured

approach to the use of reflective practice. Practitioners who participated in the action research study assert that the action research framework:

- Created time and space for reflection
- Had a supportive reflective structure and engendered more pro-active reflective practice
- Engendered a reflective dynamic in the action research group
- Resulted in more pro-active participation by practitioners in using the reflective process
- Created an element of discipline and accountability in context of using reflective practice
- Was systemic and transparent

Using a structured approach such as action research also overcame barriers, such as time, to allow practitioners to engage in reflection. The process also created a supportive environment and lent itself to the promotion of reflective practice. It should be noted that, in the context of this research study, other technically structured approaches were also positively used to apply the reflective approach, for example, the Mol an Óige model. These findings support the case that employing reflective practice in a structured practice environment results in the more effective use of the reflective methodology. Practitioner accounts and findings from the action research process used in the study illustrate how the use of reflective practice can enhance practice by equipping practitioners to review, contemplate and reflect on aspects of their professional practice in order to learn and subsequently improve how they deliver services and interventions to families.

### ***8.6 Findings from the research study - The use of critical reflective practice***

This research study has identified gaps in relation to levels of knowledge and use, among research participants, regarding the area of critical reflective practice. This represents a significant deficit if one considers the value base and code of ethics that

guides and informs the social work/social care professions. For example, the social work code of ethics, advanced by the European Federation of Social Workers, advocate that the pursuit of human rights and social justice are fundamental principles that should underpin the social work profession. Similarly, the Irish Association of social workers, through their code of ethical practice, promote the development of critical debate and dialogue and strive to bring about positive social change. In addition, the social work profession endorse the need for practitioner awareness around issues pertaining to inequality, anti-discrimination and the need for anti-oppressive practice. Deficits in levels of understanding regarding the role of critical reflective practice, as evidenced in this study, will negate the ability of practitioners to embrace this critical perspective. Furthermore, the absence of knowledge and awareness in relation to the area of critical reflective practice will prevent practitioners adopting more critically informed methods of intervention. Similarly, the absence of maintaining a critically reflective professional stance raises the broader question as to how practitioners guard against their own potential prejudice and employ anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice in terms of service users and across the broader organisational context.

### ***8.7 Limitations of the research study and the need for further research***

In undertaking this research study I endeavoured to incorporate the views of service users. These seventeen service users worked with practitioners who were participating in the research study. It was not possible to identify any discernible features, in the interview data collected, regarding the use or non-use of reflective practice by these practitioners. A more specific comparative research design would be required to capture the experience of service users who engage with reflective or non-reflective practitioners. This would be particularly insightful in relation to linking the reflective process with better outcomes for children and families.

The research design and methodology employed in this research study explored the benefits of using reflective practice in the context of a structured action research setting. Evidence from this study positively reinforces the view that reflective practice was

effectively used in this action research setting. However, it should be acknowledged that that there are some limitations to this finding, for example, if outside the specific confines of a research study would action research or any other structured approach work. Similarly, no other models of structured reflection were tested in this study and this represents a further limitation regarding the overall study. The introduction of structured reflection into busy social work departments and the effective routine employment of the approach is still untested and an area requiring further exploratory research.

A further limitation of this research study relates to exploring the theoretical concept of critical reflective practice and the applied significance of this approach in the context of professional child care practice. This study has highlighted deficits in understanding amongst practitioners regarding this conceptual approach. Findings from this study also suggest that there is an absence of awareness and understanding amongst practitioners in relation to critical reflective practice. Further research in this area would be informative in terms of exploring the link between theory and practice in this area and the implications for social care practice if this critical approach is not employed.

### ***8.8 Reflective practice going forward***

There is an overarching consensus evident in the findings from this research study that practitioners do value the concept of reflective practice and do perceive that multiple benefits result from their use of the approach. Nevertheless, findings emerging from this research study also indicate that the concept of reflective practice is not being used to its full potential. A number of factors are contributing to this underuse. Firstly, findings from this research study highlight clear deficits in relation to the provision of training for child care practitioners and managers in respect of reflective practice. Practitioners should be provided with adequate training in relation to the theoretical, contextual and practical use of reflective practice. Theoretical training will inform practitioners regarding the underlying theoretical basis of learning theory that underpins the reflective concept. Reflective practice as a conceptual entity is understood in broad terms by practitioners and linked to different definitions. This study has illustrated the differing

contexts where the reflective approach is used and the multiple models that are available for employing the approach. The majority of practitioners in this research study presented as understanding the concept of reflective practice as a common sense approach to their practice. A more informed theoretical understanding of the reflective concept making links with learning theory would better explain the potential inherent in using the reflective methodology and maximise the benefits that can result from using the approach.

Practitioners should also be trained in relation to the different contexts in which the reflective process is used. For example, in the formal context of supervision or, alternatively, in the group or peer context in which the approach can be employed. Similarly, in the informal individual context or when reflection involving a critical friend takes place. Practitioners also require training in relation to the practical application of the reflective process for example, when using a reflective model or when using a reflective journal. Being aware of the mechanics of these processes and their practical application are essential aspects of using the reflective approach effectively. Such training will equip practitioners with the requisite knowledge and understanding in relation to the reflective process to assist them apply the approach and, as a consequence, enable practitioners to get the maximum potential from using the approach.

Findings from this research study also highlight deficits in relation to levels of knowledge and understanding among research participants regarding the concept of critical reflective practice. Specific training and awareness in relation to this theoretical concept and approach should be provided to all front-line practitioners in order to inform their professional practice. Training in relation to critical reflective practice is also an important dimension to social work/social care practice in terms of understanding and using anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. In addition, practitioners need to be aware of the power dynamic in their professional relationships with service users and how this variable can potentially impact on the development of effective and productive relationship-based practice. Awareness of critical reflective

practice should also inform practitioners regarding the ethos and values that underpin the provision of social work and social care practice and which should inform their individual practice and child care service delivery.

Findings from the action research component used in this study demonstrate the enhanced effectiveness of using reflective practice in the context of a structured practice environment. There was a marked difference in relation to the level of use and the overall effectiveness of employing the reflective approach in the context of a structured framework. Using this supportive framework was an enabling factor in assisting practitioners employ the reflective approach; while the process further assisted in overcoming barriers that inhibited the use of the methodology. Consideration should, therefore, be given by the Child and Family Agency Work Force Development Department to explore the introduction of mechanisms such as the action research process and structure to assist and support staff in the use of reflective practice. The existence of a structured practice environment, based on the findings from this research study, lend themselves to the more effective and consistent use of reflective practice and the ultimate improvement of child care service provision.

### ***Summary***

This study has demonstrated the importance of reflective practice in the context of child care practice and the multiple positive benefits that can accrue from the effective application of the approach. In addition this research study has illustrated the barriers and enabling factors that can prohibit or encourage the use of the reflective methodology. In undertaking this research study deficits in the use of critical reflective practice have also been highlighted and the need for more effective training to be developed to better equip and support practitioners to apply the reflective methodology. In addition this research study has illustrated the extent to which reflective practice is under used and how the provision of supportive reflective structures, such as the action research process, can potentially enhance the use and effectiveness of employing the reflective approach in the context of child care service provision. Finally, this research study has effectively demonstrated that child care practitioners needs to be

contemplative, thoughtful and reflective and that practitioners who are employed this area need to use reflective practice as an integral and imperative element of their practice.

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## **Appendices**

***Appendix A - Request for release of child care staff to participate in study***

4<sup>th</sup> March,2010

Re: Release of child care staff to participate in PhD research study:

Dear,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you following our recent telephone conversation in relation to my PhD research study which will be undertaken at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Please find enclosed an outline of the study and the research aims and objectives in the document attached to this letter. The purpose of this letter is to formally seek your support in respect of the release of child care staff to participate in the research study.

I anticipate that twenty social work and child care practitioners overall will be invited to participate in the research study. These practitioners will be chosen by a process of random selection from both the statutory and voluntary sectors. The time commitment involved by each research participant will vary depending on their level of involvement in the study. Each research participant will be invited to participate in a baseline and follow-up interview. Ten of the twenty practitioners will also be invited to take part in an action research component of the study. I am unable to specify the duration of this aspect of the study due to the open-ended nature of the methodology but anticipate that it will involve one meeting per month for a period of months. I would also like to interview ten service managers. This aspect of the study will involve a one off interview. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this research study, or would like me to clarify further any aspect of the research design, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0949042472/087 9087802 or by email via [liam.whyte@hse.ie](mailto:liam.whyte@hse.ie).

I would like to sincerely thank you for your support in relation to this research study.

Yours Sincerely

Liam White  
PhD Research Student: NUIG

*Appendix B - Research study proposal*

Proposal in relation to PhD research study  
Department of Sociology and Political Science  
National University of Ireland

**An exploration of the value of reflective practice for  
child care and family support service provision**

Liam White

Date 4<sup>th</sup> March 2010

## **Introduction**

Child care and family support service provision in Ireland is informed and guided by an over-arching legislative context. The Child Care Act (1991) and the Children Act (2001) place a legislative responsibility on the Health Service Executive to provide support services that meet the needs of vulnerable children in society who are not receiving adequate care and protection. The Child Care Act (1991) Part 2, Section 3.3 also places a statutory responsibility on the Health Service Executive to provide a range of family support services to help and support families in need. In addition to this legislative imperative, there are a number of core national policy documents that also inform and influence the provision of child care and family support services in Ireland. These include the National Guidelines for the Protection and welfare of Children - Children First (1999), the National Children Strategy (2000) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to which the Republic of Ireland is a signatory.

In this legislative and policy context the provision of effective and efficient child care service provision represents an ongoing challenge. There is unquestionably a need for skilled practitioners who can engage with families and build effective professional relationships; practitioners who can draw upon evidence-based practice and interventions informed by reflection, experiential learning and empirical research; ultimately, competent practitioners who can help and support families and achieve positive outcomes through their interventions.

In undertaking this research study the author will contend that the potential to enhance and improve service provision and the skills, knowledge-base and overall ability of practitioners can be influenced and achieved by the more effective utilisation of “Reflective Practice”. However, the author will also contend that reflective practice cannot be effective unless the appropriate supports and structures are put in place to support practitioners in learning from their experience and in reaching and maximising their full professional potential whilst supporting families facing adversity.

## **Aims and objectives of the study**

The aim of this research study is to test the hypothesis that the effective implementation of Reflective Practice, in a social care and family support setting, requires a rigorous, systematic and structured method/model of implementation to maximise its use. The study also aims to assess the broader impact and value of utilising Reflective Practice in terms of the enhancement of practice knowledge and skills and the improvements that families experience from practitioners who employ interventions that are informed by Reflective Practice. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To critically review and analyse both national and international literature in relation to Reflective Practice

2. To test the hypothesis that the effective implementation of Reflective Practice requires a structured and systematic method/model of implementation
3. To explore the usefulness and benefits, to families and children, of practitioners utilising Reflective Practice in the context of family support service intervention and service provision
4. To elicit the views and experiences of service users who receive interventions from Reflective Practitioners
5. To elicit the views and experiences of practitioners who utilise Reflective Practice in the development of interventions with young people and families
6. To describe and locate the concept of Reflective Practice in its theoretical, policy, practice and service setting

### **Brief outline of study**

To gain insight and knowledge regarding the value, effectiveness and benefits of using Reflective Practice, the following investigation will be developed with practitioners and service users.

Twenty practitioners will be recruited to participate in the study. All twenty participants who agree to participate will be trained, by the researcher, to utilise the Johns model of Reflective Practice. This group of twenty practitioners will then be randomly split into two cohort subgroups of ten. **Cohort group (a)** will implement the Johns Reflective Model for a duration of one year with families with whom they are working. The researcher will check in and monitor with individual practitioners in this cohort group throughout the year, however, support offered will be minimal. **Cohort group (b)**, also consisting of ten practitioners will also be trained up in the use of the Johns Model of Reflective Practice. However, cohort group (b) will be invited to participate in a process using Action Research to implement the Johns Reflective model over the course of one year. The use of action research methodology will involve a more rigorous, systematic and searching implementation of the Johns Reflective model. This implementation will be more structured and rigorously applied with cohort group (b). The use of Action Research methodology will enable the researcher to test the hypothesis that the effective utilisation of Reflective Practice requires structure, rigour and practitioner support. Throughout the study the researcher will observe and investigate the experiences of both cohort groups. At the conclusion of the study individual participants from both groups will be interviewed about their experience of using the Johns Reflective Model and their perceptions of using the reflective process. Particular attention will be paid to the reported benefits, value, effectiveness and learning potential involved. The views of families who received services from Reflective Practitioners - one family per practitioner in each cohort group will also be recruited. This service user feedback is an important aspect of the research in that it enables families to articulate their experiences

and their perceptions of receiving services/intervention from reflective practitioners. Individual interviews will be conducted with families to elicit their views regarding the value, benefits and effectiveness of reflective interventions. Family involvement will of course be subject to their voluntary participation and will also be with the agreement of the agency working with the family.

### **Scientific and Theoretical background to the study**

Early references to critical reflection and the reflective process can be traced as far back as Socrates who stressed the centrality of critical self-examination or living the examined life (White et al., 2006). Dewey (1933) further engendered interest in the concept, particularly in the field of education, and was influential in the development and evolution of the reflective process. The concept of Reflective Practice has been further developed by Habermas (1971,1984) who articulated the notion that, through reflective thought, a full understanding of dominant political and social forces offers freedom for the individual. Habermas also warned that professionals have immense power and awareness of this power is vital for those who deliver services. The concept of Reflective Practice is highly prominent in research in education, social care, nursing and other disciplines (Dewey,1933; Brookfield,1995; Freire 1972; White et al., 2006; Ruch, 2005/2007; Johns 2004). However, the concept is very under-researched in terms of available empirical evidence supporting its value and effectiveness. This gap in empirical research is particularly pertinent in the area of Social Work and Family Support. This research study will endeavour to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the experiences of practitioners who utilise the approach and those service users who receive reflective-practice informed interventions. The theoretical and philosophical framework of critical theory will inform the ontological, epistemological and methodological perspective adapted by the researcher. The use of a critical theory approach will also enable the development of analysis that will challenge existing perspectives and practice methods. The rationale in undertaking this study is the pursuit of more efficient and effective family support and child care services; child care services that meet the needs of families and children and are furnished by practitioners who utilise reflection to develop informed, thoughtful and considered practice interventions that ultimately result in better outcomes for families.

### **Conclusion**

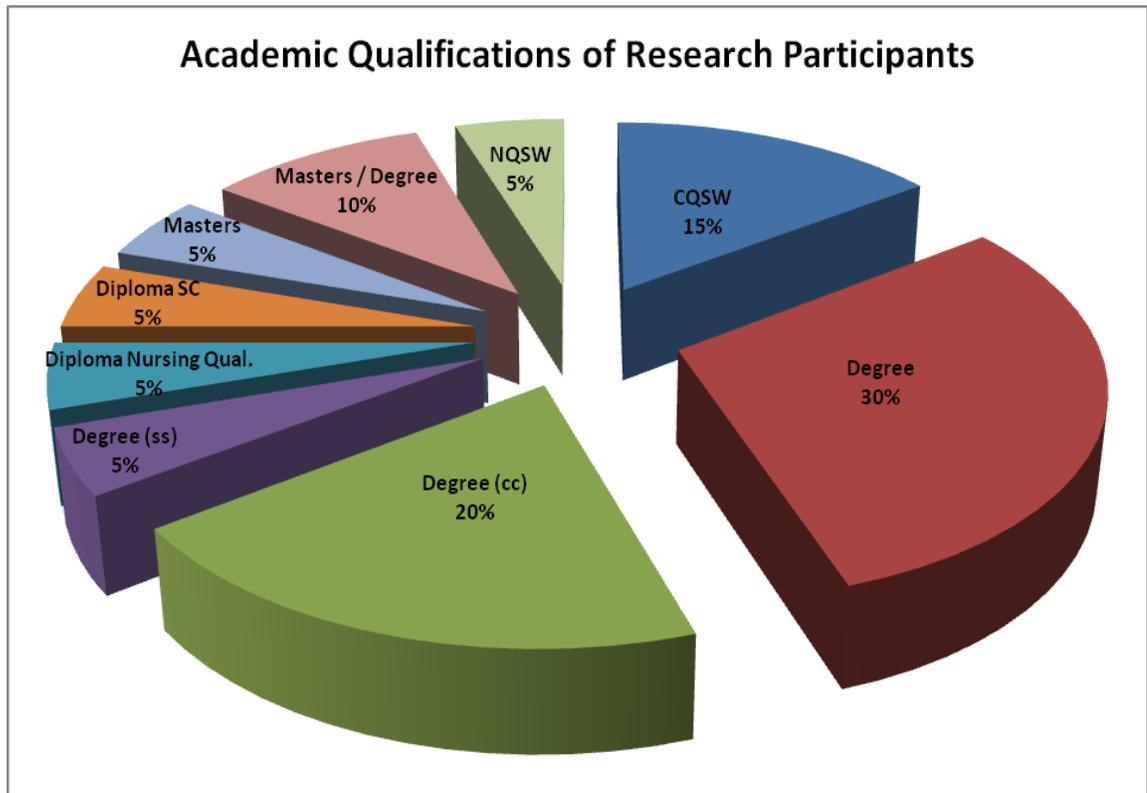
While there is a considerable volume of literature describing the process of “Reflective Practice” there is relatively little empirical research exploring the actual benefits, effectiveness and value of using “Reflective Practice”. This research study will therefore address that gap in the research and generate new practice knowledge in the process. New insights and learning will be gained and a more informed understanding of the functional dynamics using “Reflective Practice” will emerge. It is anticipated that this

research study also has the potential to inform and enhance the provision of child care services by assisting practitioners in a very practical way in terms of enhancing and improving practice knowledge and practitioner skills by the more systematic utilisation of “reflective Practice”. This hypothesis will be tested during the research. This is an exciting research opportunity and a project that can only inform and enlighten the field of child care service provision and ultimately interventions delivered by child care professionals.

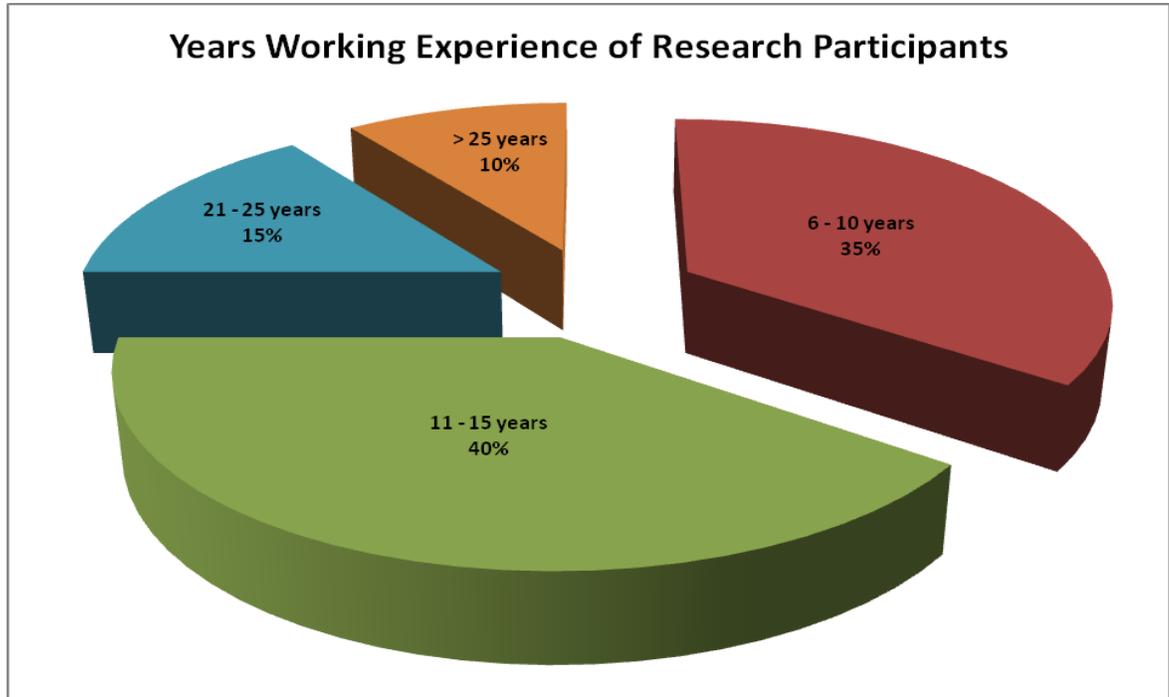
***Appendix C - Employment status of participant practitioners***

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Statutory/Voluntary</b>
Practitioner 1	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 2	Child care Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 3	Child care Worker	Voluntary
Practitioner 4	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 5	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 6	Child care Worker	Voluntary
Practitioner 7	Child care Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 8	Child care Worker	Voluntary
Practitioner 9	Child care Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 10	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 11	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 12	Child care Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 13	Child care Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 14	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 15	Child care Worker	Voluntary
Practitioner 16	Child care Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 17	Social Worker	Statutory
Practitioner 18	Child care Worker	Voluntary
Practitioner 19	Child care Worker	Voluntary
Practitioner 20	Child care Worker	Voluntary

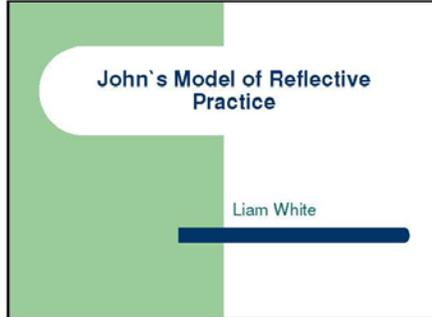
**Appendix D - Academic qualifications of participant practitioners**



***Appendix E - Work experience of participant practitioners***



**Appendix F - PowerPoint presentation used for training**



John's Model of Reflective Practice

Liam White

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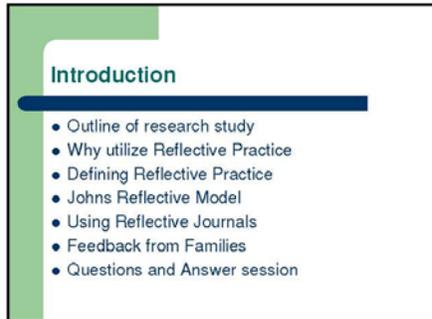
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**Introduction**

- Outline of research study
- Why utilize Reflective Practice
- Defining Reflective Practice
- Johns Reflective Model
- Using Reflective Journals
- Feedback from Families
- Questions and Answer session

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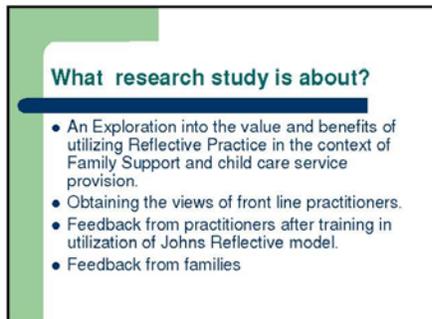
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**What research study is about?**

- An Exploration into the value and benefits of utilizing Reflective Practice in the context of Family Support and child care service provision.
- Obtaining the views of front line practitioners.
- Feedback from practitioners after training in utilization of Johns Reflective model.
- Feedback from families

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### What research study is about

- There are two randomly selected research groupings of ten practitioners.
- Cohort (a) Training in Johns Model of Reflective Practice – Practitioners then utilize model.
- Cohort (b) Training in Johns Model of Reflective Practice followed by implementation of model using Action Research methodology.

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### Why utilize Reflective Practice?

- We work with complex families.
- We intervene in difficult and challenging situations.
- It can be difficult at times to know how to help families and to identify the best thing to do for them.
- Dealing with service users can be stressful

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### Why utilize Reflective Practice

- Enhance knowledge-base
- Enhance skill-base
- Apply theory to practice
- Eradicate habitual practice
- Learn form experience
- Identify positive practice
- Develop better outcomes
- Improve standards of service provision
- Enhance relationship-based practice
- Be a more effective practitioner.

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### Defining reflective Practice

- Reflection is learning through our everyday experiences towards realising one's vision of desirable practice as a lived reality. It is a critical and reflexive process of self enquiry and transformation of being and becoming the practitioner you desire to be ( Johns, 2009)

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### Defining Reflective Practice

Pinkerton (2000) suggests that ReflectivePractice is a means of evaluating outcomes for service users and therefore facilitates quality service provision based on best practice.

Taylor (1998) defines Reflective Practice as "the systematic and thoughtful means by which practitioners can make sense of their practice as they go about their daily work"

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### Defining Reflective Practice

- Fook & Gardner (2007) view Reflective Practice as an approach to enable practitioners to become more aware of the theory and assumptions inherent in their practice.
- Atkins (1994) has described Reflective Practice as a complex and deliberate way of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn form it.

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**Reflective Practice**

- A pre-dominant model of Reflective Practice was developed by Christopher Johns (1994 – 2000)
- The John's Model developed as a result of his work in the area of nursing.
- John's envisaged his model being utilised within a process of guided and structured reflection.
- His focus was on uncovering and making explicit the knowledge that we use in our practice

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**Reflective Practice**

- The working model consists of a series of pre-constructed questions that are asked.
- One core question followed by five cue questions that are designed to guide analysis whilst reflecting on an incident or practice experience

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**Reflective Practice**

**(1) Core Question:**

What information do I need to access in order to learn through this experience.

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### (2)Description of Experience

- Phenomenon: Describe the here and now experience
- Causal: What essential factors contributed to this experience
- Context: What are the significant background factors to this experience
- Clarifying: What are the key processes (for reflection) in this experience

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### (3)Reflection

- What was I trying to do?
- Why did I intervene as I did?
- What were the consequences of my actions for:  
Myself?  
The patient/family?  
The people I work with?

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### (3)Reflection

- How did I feel about this experience when it was happening?
- How did the patient feel about it?
- How do I know how the patient felt about it?

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**(4) Influencing Factors**

- What internal factors influenced my decision-making?
- What external factors influenced my decision-making?
- What sources of knowledge did/should have influenced my decision-making?

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**(5) Could I have dealt with this situation better**

- What other choices did I have?
- What would be the consequences of these choices?

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**(6) Learning**

- How do I feel now about this experience?
- How have I made sense of this experience in light of past experiences and future practice?

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### (6) Learning

- How has this experience changed my ways of knowing:

Empirics  
Aesthetics  
Ethics  
Personal

Johns (1994)

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### Using Reflective Journals

- John's advocates and endorses the use of reflective journals as part of reflective process

" writing reflections in a journal creates a space in often busy and distracted lives to focus on self, to look in on self..." Johns (p44 2000)

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### Using Reflective Journals

- A place to gather your thoughts
- Reflect on your knowledge and thoughts
- Reflect on values and assumptions
- Process of self enquiry
- Listen to your own voice
- Can share with supervisors
- Would like to review them as part of research

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### Feedback form families

- An important aspect of this research study is to ascertain the views of families
- Would like to interview a family that you have worked with.
- Will design a short interview schedule. The interview questions will be general e.g Did you find the service helpful? How did the service help your family? Would you recommend service?

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### Questions and Answers

- Can you contact me during the year? Yes
- Will I be identified in study? No
- Will any family be identified in study? No
- What if I don't use reflective journal? Fine
- Any other questions?

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### Conclusion

- Thank you all very much for your time and commitment. All data collected will be treated with strict confidentiality. All data is invaluable and will inform research study
- Thank You Again

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***Appendix G - Profile of participant service managers***

	Discipline/Agency	Role	Statutory/Voluntary
Manager 1	HSE	Child care Manager	Statutory
Manager 2	HSE	Principal Social Worker	Statutory
Manager 3	St Vincent De Paul	Service Manager	Voluntary
Manager 4	HSE	Social Work Team Leader	Statutory
Manager 5	HSE	Social Work Team Leader	Statutory
Manager 6	ISPCC	Regional Manager	Voluntary
Manager 7	HSE	Social Work Team Leader	Statutory
Manager 8	Foróige	Regional Manager	Voluntary
Manager 9	HSE	Child care Leader	Statutory
Manager 10	HSE	Social Work Team Leader	Statutory

***Appendix H - Letter to participant service users***

20<sup>th</sup> June, 2015

**Re: PhD Research Study**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I hope this letter finds you well? As you may recall you agreed to be interviewed by me in 2011 as part of my research thesis exploring the benefits of using reflective practice in the context of child care service provision.

I would just like to take this opportunity to inform you that due to methodological issues I was unable to use the interview data you provided as part of the research study. I would, however, like to take this opportunity to again thank you got agreeing to participate in the research study.

Yours Sincerely

Liam White

***Appendix I - Example of minutes of Action Research Group meeting***

**Minutes of meeting held 4<sup>th</sup> October 2010  
Action Research Group - Cohort (b)**

**Venue: ..... Offices, .....**

Present

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Liam White

**Apologies**

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Before the meeting began Liam White advised the group that he has heard nothing recent from .....

It was agreed that minutes from the Action Research meetings would still be sent to ..... in the event that she was able to attend future meetings.

Liam White then provided an outline of a proposed agenda for today`s meeting and invited colleagues present to add to the agenda - there were no additional items added. Liam then outlined the following agenda items for discussion.

**Proposed Agenda Items**

- Review minutes meeting held 13<sup>th</sup> September
- Matters arising
- Check-in with Action Research Colleagues

- Discussion/feedback re structured reflection (as per last meeting)
- Feedback re Johns Model of Reflective Practice by group
- Feedback re Use of Reflective Journals by group
- Issue of addressing the lack of culture of Reflective Practice within Organisations - (vol or stat). Issue to addressed using Action Research approach
- Date for next meeting

Before addressing the main agenda, Liam White reminded the group that this was the sixth action research meeting. Liam advised that, given that colleagues had been using the Johns Model and the Reflective journals for also three months, he wanted to try and capture how individuals were finding the reflective approach and the value that participants place on using these tools.

### **Minutes meeting held 13<sup>th</sup> September 10**

Liam checked that everyone present had received the minutes - all present had indeed received the minutes by email.

### **Matters Arising**

No matters arising

### **Check in with Colleagues**

Liam checked in with each group member. All colleagues present reported that they were getting on fine with using both reflective model and reflective journals. There were no significant problems reported in relation to using reflective approach at this point.

### **Discussion/ feedback re using structured reflection**

Liam reminded the group that a decision had been reached at the last meeting to try out some structured reflection as a solution to the issue of time management and being more disciplined at taking time out to engage in reflective practice. The group had agreed to pencil in time in their respective diaries for this purpose. The frequency and duration was a matter for each individual. Liam then asked individual colleagues present how they had got on with this approach.

..... felt that putting dates for structured time in diary brought discipline for her. It was a prompt and helpful for her to pencil in specific time for reflection.

..... wasn't at last meeting but felt that putting in structured time would be something she would have to do to make it work for her.

..... advised that the structured time didn't work for her because of time constraints and pressures of work as her team are under staffed. .... felt that it is something that would work for her in the future.

..... stated that the use of structured time worked well for her.

..... advised that using structured time was how she worked anyway - it's a prompt.

..... likened it to having an appointment with yourself.

..... wasn't at last meeting but has used structured time for engaging in reflection and this did work for her.

..... felt it was a good way to work as when she writes it in her diary she is more likely to engage in reflection.

Overall, the consensus of the group was that the idea of structured time was a good solution to addressing and overcoming the problem of time. This may not represent a total solution but was a good strategy to assist colleagues manage the process better.

### **Feedback in relation to use of Johns Model**

Liam advised that the group had been using the Johns model for almost three months at this stage. Liam now wanted to get some feedback about how the group considered the Johns model in terms of value and benefit.

..... felt that the Johns model was too tedious to use and that there was no flow to it. Olivia also felt that there were too many questions and that some of the terminology was off-putting and jargon.

..... commented that she was trying to undertake planning work recently but found the Johns model unhelpful as it was too retrospective and in the past tense.

..... commented that she uses the reflective model when dealing with challenging cases and frustrations as opposed to when she does something well.

..... also felt the model wasn't particularly helpful when you're in the middle of a situation.

..... commented that she finds it difficult to reflect using the model on things that go well. .... also felt that the reflective model would be more effective if the whole team were using it.

..... stated that all her reflections using the model/journal were negative. .... felt that the Johns questions lend themselves to negative situations.

Liam thanked group members for their comments and input re their experience of using the Johns model. Liam asked if the group, as a collective, could attempt to design their own reflective model. Some discussion followed regarding this suggestion and it was agreed that the group would try and design a reflective model. The group agreed to utilise the action research process to address some of the problems and issues raised by group members regarding their experience of using the Johns model. It was also agreed that Liam would circulate some reflective models from his literature review, by way of examples, to assist group members with the design of the reflective model.

### **Feedback in relation to use of Reflective journals**

Liam advised that he wanted to get some feedback also from the group in relation to their use of reflective journals. The journals were not part of the Johns model but Christopher Johns does endorse their use as an added reflective tool.

..... found the journal helpful and it helped her to do thinking whilst doing. .... uses the Johns questions as a prompt and guide. .... felt she would continue to use a reflective journal after research project.

.....advised that she hated using the reflective journal - she found it a huge chore and had particular problems with using language. .... did not feel she would use journal after research project.

.....found the journal useful when she got time to use it - .... didn't like last few questions in Johns model and didn't use them when writing journal. .... felt she would use a journal in the future.

.....advised that she didn't mind journaling and would probably continue to use this reflective tool but wasn't too fussed on the Johns reflective model itself as an aid. .... didn't find the reflective model that helpful overall.

.....stated that she doesn't like journaling and that she found it a chore and didn't find it at all helpful.

.....felt she wouldn't use a reflective journal when research project was over.

..... also commented that she didn't think a journal would help her tease out deeper issues or assist with deeper reflection, in fact, using a journal would be a barrier for she felt.

.....stated that she did find the journal useful in working through challenges and she would use one again.

.....stated that she found journal helpful and that she would use one after the research had concluded.

Liam thanked everyone for their comments. Liam advised that there was no consensus emerging on the value of the reflective journals. Some group members found them useful and others did not. However, this emerging theme was a useful insight in itself. Liam advised that he would revisit the issue of the Johns Model and the use of reflective journals at a later stage with everyone and obtain a more in-depth response then, but contribution today was informative.

### **Problem/Issue of addressing no reflective culture in organisation (voluntary or statutory)**

Liam outlined that the effective use of reflective practice would require a work culture and work organisation that supported and encouraged reflective practice. Some colleagues had previously stated that they felt no such culture existed. Liam asked if the

group could look at this issue using the action research process and view the issue as a problem to be solved by the group.

Some general discussion followed:

..... commented that as a team leader she previously used learning sets to encourage staff to reflect. This involved one worker coming to a meeting and discussing particular issues with work colleagues.

.....went on to say that, while it worked well for a while, the process started to focus on individual's personal issues and the process then started to become problematic. However, as a reflective tool the learning sets were very useful and encouraged reflective practice.

.....commented that that her team bring case to fortnightly team meetings when a case is profiled and group discussion follows - the team found this process helpful.

.....commented that she has recently been invited to speak to her team about the reflective work she is involved in.

A consensus emerged that the most effective immediate way to introduce a culture of reflection was to do so through engaging your colleagues and team in the reflective process. Due to time constraints Liam requested that this issue be revisited at the next meeting.

#### **Date of next meeting**

Some discussion followed about changing the date of the next meeting as it didn't suit a group member due to other work commitments. The issue of changing the day from Monday to Wednesday was also discussed. It was agreed to change the meeting day from Monday to Wednesday from now on. The date of the next meeting was also changed to Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> November at 2.30 pm ..... offices

Liam White

**Date next meeting: Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2.30pm ..... Offices**

## ***Appendix J - Example of memos to self***

Issue regarding use of reflective practice. Reflective practice not checked by manager. No accountable for reflecting or not. Engaging in reflective practice optional for practitioners - part of issue of there being no culture of reflective practice

Memo118

6th May 12

Some of the negative experiences of service users may be down to deficits in practitioner skill/knowledge base and their lack of reflective practice in identifying these deficits

Memo119

2nd June 12

Is it possible to make reflective practice quantifiable/ measurable

Memo 120

2nd June

To be made more relevant for practitioners and to engender a reflective culture the use of reflective practice needs to be built into practice interventions and permeate throughout all aspects of social work/care practice. This may be more effectively achieved if model/structure apparent.

Memo 121: 9th July

Clear and consistent emergent theme and trend in all strands of data that reflective practice incorporates practice benefits for front line practitioners - five key areas were this is considered most important from practitioner perspective; promotes self-awareness; improves practice; practice learning from experience; contributes to better outcomes; contributes to better service provision for families.

Memo 122: 9th July

The data collated suggests that at one level there is a good working knowledge of what constitutes reflective practice e.g Evaluating work;evaluating practice and looking back at self as practitioner. However, there is also a significant theme highlighting confusion and lack of clarity about the concept of reflective practice and the need for training, clarification and a definitive structure to assist staff in using reflective practice.

Memo 123: 9th July

There is a consistent theme emerging from the data in relation to the barriers faced by practitioners in their endeavours to be reflective practitioners; Time; heavy caseloads; organisational/management issues and lack of clarity around what reflective practice represents.

Memo 124: 9th July

There is overwhelming evidence that the majority of front line practitioners who participated in this study do not engage in critical reflective practice - lack of importance, lack of awareness and powerlessness appear to be the main barriers.

*Appendix K - Action Research Summary Report*

**Action Research Summary Report**

**Co-Participants/Researchers**

**Compiled by Liam White**

## **Action Research Summary Report to Co-Participants/Researchers:**

### **Introduction:**

The following summary report incorporates an overview of the action research process that took place over ten group meetings between June 2010 and February 2011. This action research project formed part of a PhD research study conducted by the author exploring the benefits of utilising reflective practice in the context of child care and family support service provision. Included in this report is a rationale for using the action research approach; a definition of the action research process; a description of the action research process utilised and a break-down of the issues that emerged during the action research process. Finally the solutions that developed using the action research problem-solving cycle are also described.

### **Rationale for utilising the Action Research approach:**

The rationale for utilising an action research approach in the context of this study was directly linked to the over-arching research question associated with the study. This research question endeavours to explore the benefits of utilising reflective practice in the context of social care and family support service provision. The research methodology utilised in undertaking this study was guided and informed by a grounded theory approach. The use of action research is consistent with this methodology in terms of the emergent nature of data collated and the analytical process utilised to evaluate the data obtained. The action research approach utilised presented a research mechanism to explore, in some detail, the practice experience of ten front-line practitioners implementing a specific reflective model. As Coghlan (2010, p.5) highlights, engaging the research participants in the process is of vital importance. “An important qualitative element of action research is how people participate in the choice of research and how they engage in the process of action and enquiry”. The use of the action research approach was beneficial for three reasons. Firstly, the process could be utilised to identify and resolve problems encountered by professionals in their daily use of the Johns reflective model. Secondly, the action research process could enable insights to be gained in relation to the practical value of utilising reflective practice by child care professionals, thereby addressing the overarching research question. Thirdly, using the action research approach presented an opportunity to introduce exploratory change by practitioners in relation to their use of reflective practice, thereby adding to the body of knowledge in relation to this area.

### **Defining Action Research:**

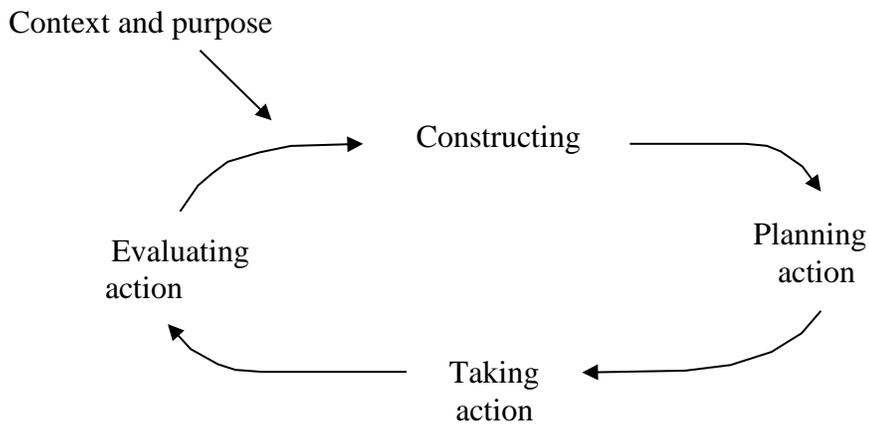
The early history of action research can be traced to the pioneering work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin. Recognition of Lewin's contribution in the area of action research is widely acknowledged within the literature (Morton-Cooper, 2000; Coghlan et al 2010; McIntosh, 2010; Reason and Bradbury, 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Holloway, 2010). While Lewin's use of the process was in a different context, the concept of bringing about change was nevertheless evident in his early application of the approach. As Coghlan et al. (2010) observes however, in the more contemporary context of the present day, action research is a generic term that is utilised to describe a diverse family of action research practices and methodologies. Action research is described by Reason and Bradbury (2010, p.1) as incorporating specific characteristics "action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a particular worldview..." It should be highlighted also that the diverse usages of action research are informed by quite different philosophical orientations. This idea is highlighted by O'Brien (1998) who outlines the variation and diversity associated with the action research approach. Describing the concept of diversity further, Kemmis et al. (Denzin and Lincoln, 1995) describe first and second generation variations of action research. However, for the purposes of this research study the action research approach is being utilised to inform and influence child care practice, generate knowledge and assist in the development of a collaborative problem-solving approach to utilising reflective practice. This is opposed to the more critical action research and participatory action research that is linked to radical community change.

### **Description of Action Research Process utilised:**

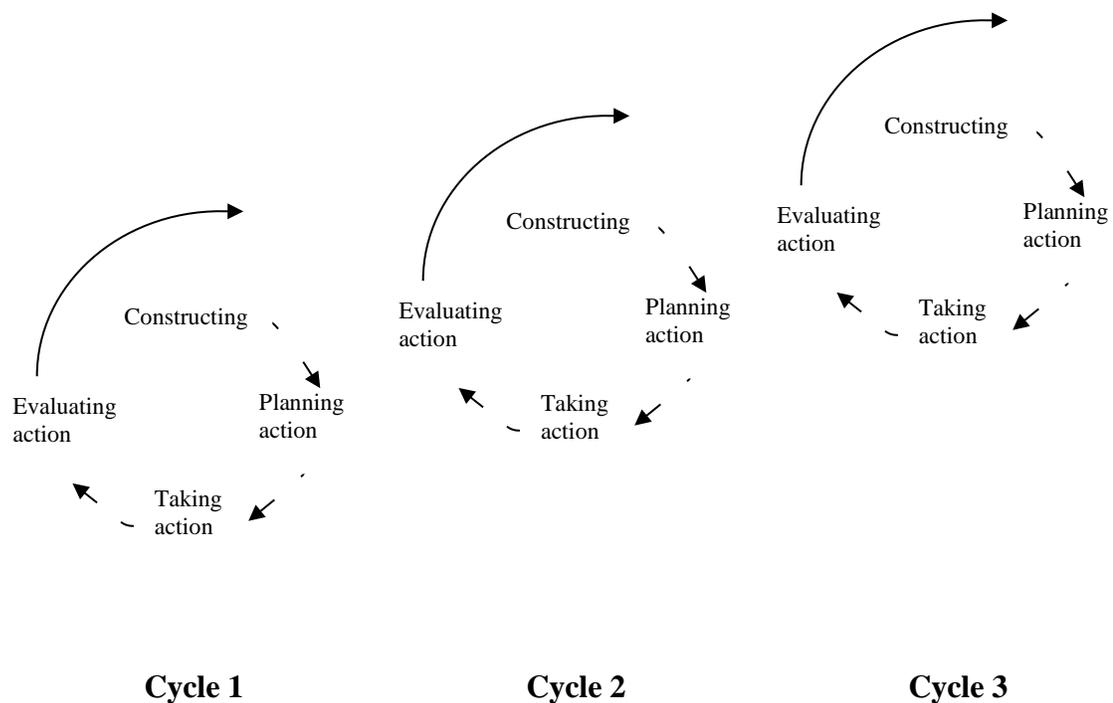
The action research model utilised in the context of this study is similar to the four stage cycle approach described by Coghlan et al. (2010). This approach followed four distinct steps and took place in the context of addressing a specific problem (s). In relation to this research study the initial problem area identified was the implementation of the Johns reflective practice model. In the process of implementing this reflective practice model other issues and problem areas were also identified and subjected to the action research process. The steps in the action research process included: (1) the construction of the problem, (2) planning action to address the identified problem, (3) taking action to address the problem and (4) evaluating the action taken. As the action research is an iterative process these four stage steps are repeated in an ongoing cycle until a resolution to the problem (s) being addressed was arrived at. The action research approach utilised in the context of this study is captured in the following diagram (Figure K.1). This diagram highlights the four step nature of the process used and the

problem-solving nature inherent in the approach. Similarly the iterative cyclical nature of the action research approach utilised is further captured in Figure K.2.

**Figure K.1: The action research cycle (Coughlan et al. 2010)**



**Figure K.2: Spiral of action research cycles (Coughlan et al. 2010)**



The participants involved in this action research project were randomly selected from a bigger group of twenty child care professionals who had agreed to take part in the research study. The ten participants were then invited to take part in the action research process which would focus on implementing the Johns reflective practice model. The action research process and approach was then presented to the group by the lead researcher by way of a PowerPoint presentation. Participants were advised that the action research approach was a democratic and collaborative framework and participants involved were essentially co-researchers in the process. Ground-rules for the group meetings were then agreed and this included issues in relation to attendance and confidentiality. Participants were also invited to retain a reflective journal as part of the exploration into the benefits of utilising reflective practice in the context of child care and family support. A SWOT analysis was then conducted by the group to consider any issues in relation to using the action research approach and process. All participants present agreed to commit to the action research process. It was agreed that minutes would be taken in relation to each meeting held and that the lead researcher could tape the Action Research sessions held and make notes. However, a number of participants expressed a wish to remain anonymous in relation to their individual contributions and identity. It was agreed that individual action research meetings would not be transcribed to ensure participant anonymity and the identity of participants would be respected at all times. Participants also agreed to hand over their reflective journals to the lead researcher at the conclusion for the purposes of analysis.

**Table K.1: Action Research Meetings Held**

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Present:</u>
14 <sup>th</sup> June 2010	10 Present
5 <sup>th</sup> July 2010	8 Present
26 <sup>th</sup> July 2010	9 Present
23 <sup>rd</sup> August 2010	6 Present
13 <sup>th</sup> September 2010	7 Present
4 <sup>th</sup> October 2010	8 Present
3 <sup>rd</sup> November 2010	6 Present
14 <sup>th</sup> December 2010	7 Present
18 <sup>th</sup> January 2010	7 Present
14 <sup>th</sup> February 2010	8 Present

In total ten action research meetings took place between June 2010 and February 2011. The specific dates and attendance at each meeting is included in Table K.1. In terms of the overall attendance the following mean score was calculated as 7.6 (76 divided 10). The level of attendance was fairly consistent. Apologies were received by the lead researcher in relation to most absenteeism. However, it was subsequently brought to the attention of the lead researcher in a follow-up interview that one group member was unable to attend action research meetings due to work pressures and on the direction of management. This was despite the lead researcher having negotiated the release of practitioners to attend the action research sessions by their relevant line managers.

**Issues addressed by action research group process:**

The action research process was utilised in the context of this research study to address issues and problems that were identified by the researcher in implementing the Johns model of reflective practice. Over the ten meetings held the following issues were highlighted and addressed using the four stage action research problem solving approach as already outlined. A summary of the specific issues addressed is included in Table K.2.

**Table K.2: Issues addressed by Action Research Group Process**

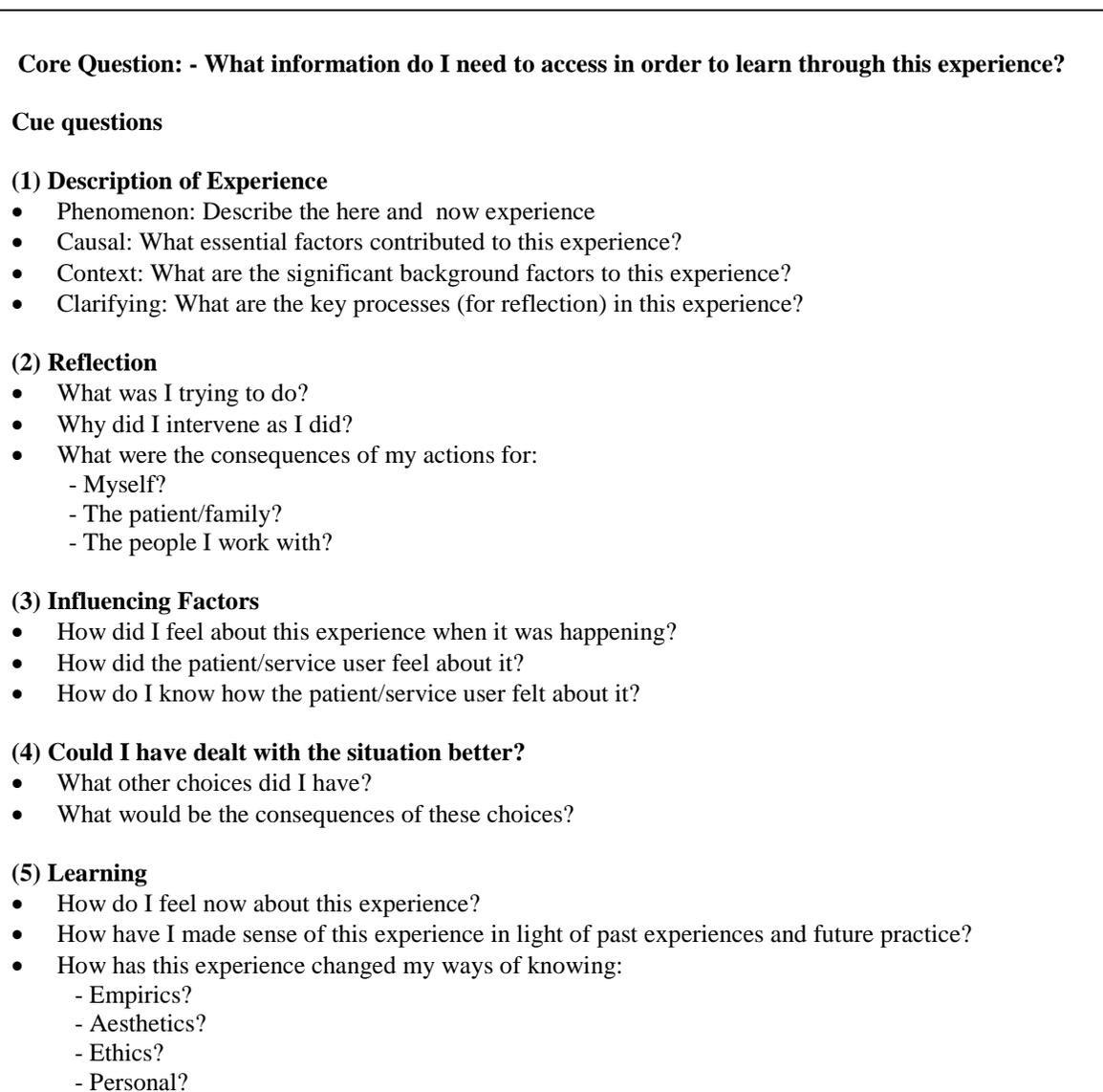
1.	Time management issues
2.	Issue of ridicule / Resistance by colleagues
3.	Using the Johns reflective model
4.	The use of reflective journals
5.	Problems in relation to organisational culture
6.	Depth of reflection / Critical reflective practice

**Using the Johns reflective model:**

At the outset of this research study the action research group agreed to implement the Johns model of reflective practice. This reflective model was pre-selected by the lead researcher because it featured prominently in the literature and equally because the model had an alignment with the critical theory tradition which underpins the overall study. This reflective model was developed by Christopher Johns and was revised and modified by Johns between 1994 and 2000. Johns developed this reflective model as a result of his work in the area of nursing. The working model developed by Johns consisted of a series of pre-constructed questions that are asked - one core question followed by five cue questions that are designed to guide analysis whilst reflecting on an

incident or practice experience. Johns envisaged his model being utilised within a process of guided and structured reflection. Johns also promoted the use of reflective journals. His reflective model could be utilised in conjunction with reflective journal writing however, this was not a prerequisite in the use of the model overall. An outline of the Johns reflective model is included in Figure K.3. All group members were briefed in relation to the use of the Johns model by way of a PowerPoint presentation. This briefing was also complemented with a written hand-out of the presentation.

**Figure K.3 Johns model of reflective practice (Johns 1994)**



### **Solutions Developed using the action research approach:**

During the course of the action research process seven specific issues and problem areas were identified by the action research group. Each of these problem areas was addressed using the Four stage action research cycle as outlined by Coghlan (2010) and as illustrated in Figure K.1. In the course of the action research process problem areas were addressed in specific sessions. There was, however, some overlap in the implementation of the four stage process and the agreed solutions, while simultaneously addressing emergent new issues and problems. The summary below includes, by way of one working example, the four stage approach highlighting the different steps in the process to address the issue of **Time Management**. The information in relation to how this issue was processed was taken from meeting minutes and the lead researcher reviewing audio-tapes of the action research group dealing with this issue. Finally, this is followed by a summary of the stages in relation to the other problem areas addressed using the Action Research process.

#### **Problem Area (1) - Time management and using reflective practice**

**Stage 1: Construction of Problem:** Action research group identified time management as a barrier to them being able to effectively engage in the use of reflective practice.

**Stage 2: Planning Action:** Action research group undertake brain-storming session in relation to the presenting problem area and the specific time management barriers that prevented them from engaging in reflective practice. These included:

- Creating space and time to reflect.
- Getting into the habit of spending time reflecting.
- Being in the right frame of mind or zone to reflect (time issue).
- Reflection not in culture of organisation - so time spent on reflection may not be valued or seen as a priority within organisation.
- Workloads prevent reflection - (time issue)
- Theory different from practice - the theory of reflective practice is centred around support but not the practical use and application of the process.
- Getting into the mindset to reflect takes time, space and no distractions.
- Some practitioners reflect whilst driving or travelling between appointments - restrictions on mileage and limitations on driving reduces opportunity to reflect.
- Lack of individual discipline to engage in reflection

**Stage 3: Taking Action:** The following proposals and action plan were developed and agreed by the action research group to address the issue of time management.

1. Group members would pencil in specific time in their diaries each week for the purposes of spending time on reflection. This approach would overcome the problems of getting into the habit of reflective practice and creating a self-

discipline. Setting aside specific time to reflect may also help individuals get into the right frame of mind.

2. Group members felt all staff needed training regarding reflective practice and this training should highlight the need to dedicate time to the process. This would break down the non-reflective culture that currently prevails. It was also felt that staff should get “time-out” with an external facilitator to assist with team reflection - someone like (named external group facilitator). This should be annual and not just when there is a problem.
3. It was agreed that group members would use their reflective journals in the context of writing about their experiences of supervision; e.g. issues that come up, positive and negative experiences etc. This would assist in getting into habit of using reflective practice in context of supervision, spending time on the process and tackling the issue of a culture of non-reflective practice that prevails.

**Stage 4: Evaluating Action:** During the second cycle of the action research process the implementation of the plan was reviewed by the action research group. Individual participants reported back on their use of structured reflection and using diaries to factor in reflective time. Aspects of the plan were also tweaked to suit individual group participants. There was also some critical feedback that some participants were still unable to make the necessary time. Using the Johns model was considered tedious and overly time consuming. By the third cycle of review, six members of the action research group reported back positively on the use of structured reflective time. However, the durability of using this solution was questioned by the group, given the unpredictable and sometimes unmanageable time pressures on child care professionals.

The following is a summary of the other action research problem areas that were identified and the solutions that were agreed by the action research Group members.

**Problem Area (2) Dealing with Resistance:**

**Stage (1) Construction of problem:** Dealing with resistance. Colleague ridicule and negativity.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Action research group discussion/exploration of issue. Ideas and suggestion put forward. Specific plan and strategy developed by group participants to address issue.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Action Plan Implemented

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Action Plan reviewed.

**Second cycle:** Review of problem area by action research group. Problem has not re-emerged and no further action necessary. This problem area to be kept under review during course of action research process.

**Problem Area (3) Using the Johns Reflective model:****Cycle one:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** The issue of implementing the Johns reflective model was agreed by the action research group to be a problem area to be dealt with using action research process.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Action research participants undertook a briefing session in relation to utilisation of the Johns Reflective model. Participants reviewed and discussed further implementation of Johns model.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Johns model utilised by individual group participants in context of own casework.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Implementation and use of John model reviewed in subsequent action research meetings and feedback obtained from individual participants of their use of the model.

**Cycle two:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Problems encountered by the action research participants in implementing the Johns reflective model. Problems related to terminology used in Johns model. Problems encountered also in working through Johns model process and using different cue questions.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Additional written material circulated by lead researcher to inform action research participants regarding use of Johns model. Case study utilised by group using Johns reflective model by way of example. Action research group discussed the use and further implementation of the Johns model.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Action research participants further implement Johns reflective model

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Use and implementation of the Johns Model further reviewed and evaluated by action research participants. Following three months of using the Johns model, general feedback from action research group was negative about their experience of using Johns reflective model.

**Cycle Three:**

**Stage (1) Construction of problem:** Action research group express negativity about use of Johns reflective model.

**Stage(2) Planning Action:** Action research group decide that they would like to design their own reflective model to meet the practical needs of reflective practice in child care setting.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Action research participants discuss and explore design of reflective model. Tentative model design and structure discussed.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Action research participants agree an embryonic reflective model type. Group agree that development of this model outside the capability

of the action research group process. It was agreed that lead researcher would revisit the development of this embryonic reflective model with the group as a specific project upon conclusion of the current research.

**Problem Area (4) The use of reflective journals:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Use of reflective journals by action research participants.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Discussed the logistics and practicalities of using a reflective journal. Further discussed and explored the type of entries to be included. Discussed using reflective journal in conjunction with Johns reflective model.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Each action research participant agreed to utilise a reflective journal during the course of action research process. It was further agreed that participants could use the journal in conjunction with Johns model, however, this was a matter for each participant to decide upon.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action Taken:** All participants report using reflective journals. Use of reflective journals analysed and reviewed in subsequent action research meeting.

**Problem Area (5) Problems in relation to organisational culture:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Lack of priority and value given to the use of reflective practice in context of organisational culture.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Discussed issue of reflective practice in the context of organisational culture. Brainstormed ways and method to make reflective practice more valued.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** Action research participants agreed to suggest team reflection in the context of their own organisations. This would include case profiling and collective engagement on the reflective process. It was further suggested that some colleagues might find using learning-sets of value. This information available if required. Issue of having reflective practice on supervision agenda also to be promoted at individual level.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Use of strategies to promote reflective practice in context of organisation to be reviewed at subsequent action research meetings

**Cycle Two:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Lack of priority and value given to the use of reflective practice in context of organisational culture.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Action research participants agreed that promotion of reflective practice and placing value on use of this process in organisational culture best achieved through engaging colleagues.

**Stage (3)** Further promotion of reflective practice to be promoted by individual group participants within context of own team.

**Stage (4)** Action research group consensus that effecting change at level of organisation difficult and requiring policy change. Action research group endorse introduction and roll out of Agenda for Children Services Policy Handbook. This policy document considered a more effective way to introduce and promote reflective practice in context of organisation.

**Problem Area (6) Depth of Reflection/ Critical Reflective Practice:**

**Stage (1) Construction of Problem:** Depth of thinking and use of critical reflective practice by practitioners.

**Stage (2) Planning Action:** Discussed issue of depth of critical thinking and use of critical reflective practice by practitioners. Ethos of social work/ child care practice; advocacy, empowerment of service users, challenging discrimination, inequality and injustice, awareness of issues in relation to poverty.

**Stage (3) Taking Action:** It was agreed that action research participants would take individual responsibility and be more aware of issues in relation to poverty, inequality and oppression. Action research participants would endeavour to use reflective process to also engage in critical reflective practice. Participants agreed that specific training in relation to anti-discriminatory practice should be requested.

**Stage (4) Evaluating Action:** Recognition within action research group that organisation can limit and inhibit extent of critical reflective possible. Issue concluded as this was last action research session held.

## Appendix L - Example of Nvivo open coding process

Open codes

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By
Accessibility of social worker	2	2	17/04/2012 13:5	LW
Action research and reflective practice	4	5	11/04/2012 09:5	LW
Action Research Barriers	6	8	22/06/2012 12:1	LW
Action research benefits RP	1	5	22/06/2012 12:1	LW
Action Research CRP	3	6	22/06/2012 12:1	LW
Action research Johns model	7	12	22/06/2012 12:1	LW
Action Research Reflective journals	8	27	22/06/2012 12:1	LW
Assessment framework utilised	17	24	11/04/2012 10:0	LW
Barriers to reflective practice	24	41	11/04/2012 09:5	LW
Being listened to	3	4	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Benefits of reflective practice	37	87	11/04/2012 09:5	LW
Caeoloads	15	16	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Confrontational style social work	1	1	16/04/2012 10:5	LW
critical reflective practice	14	20	11/04/2012 09:5	LW
Definitions of reflective practice	31	42	11/04/2012 10:1	LW
Discipline to reflect	1	1	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Empathy and social work	2	3	16/04/2012 14:0	LW
Fear of social workers	4	12	16/04/2012 10:5	LW
Fear to engage in reflective practice	8	9	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Follow-up interviews	19	21	02/04/2013 14:3	LW
Friendliness	5	8	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Helpfulness	1	1	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Honesty of social worker	6	8	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Hunour of social worker	2	6	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Informal reflection	14	16	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Johns Model of reflective practice	14	27	11/04/2012 09:5	LW
Journals and reflective practice	13	23	07/04/2012 15:4	LW
Lack of understanding regarding reflective pra	2	12	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Length of involvement	13	13	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Management	7	13	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Models of reflective practice	9	10	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Mol an Oige as reflective approach	12	20	09/04/2012 14:3	LW
Nature of child care practice	3	4	07/04/2012 15:4	LW
Negative elements re reflective practice	11	12	11/04/2012 09:5	LW
Partnership by social worker	5	11	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Policy in relation to reflective practice	3	4	09/04/2012 14:1	LW
Policy reflective practice	2	3	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Positive qualities of social worker	3	5	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Post -Assessment	14	21	21/05/2013 09:3	LW
Practical advise	9	12	16/04/2012 11:1	LW
Practitioner isolation	1	1	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Practitioner responsibility to reflect	4	4	11/04/2012 09:4	LW
Realationship based practice - social worker	10	21	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Recommending servcice	4	5	16/04/2012 11:0	LW
Reflective practice - essesntial in child care	3	5	27/04/2012 15:3	LW

### Appendix M - Example of Nvivo focused coding process

Focused Coding

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By
Barriers to using Reflective Practice	44	189	05/04/2012 15:24	LW
Benefits of using Reflective Practice	43	148	05/04/2012 15:21	LW
Changes to practice	9	14	27/04/2012 15:30	LW
Critical Reflective Practice	9	15	07/04/2012 15:41	LW
Definitions of reflective practice	32	83	05/04/2012 15:25	LW
Fear of services	4	5	16/04/2012 11:06	LW
Follow-up - definitions and understanding	18	23	01/08/2013 14:57	LW
Johns Model	8	12	27/04/2012 15:29	LW
Mol an oige - positive structure	12	19	08/07/2012 13:36	LW
Outcomes and reflective practice	12	15	07/04/2012 15:48	LW
Post interview - definitions	20	40	23/04/2013 15:08	LW
Post-interview - benefits - RP	19	36	23/04/2013 15:27	LW
Post-interview use RP	19	40	23/04/2013 15:33	LW
Post-interviews - constraints - RP	17	35	23/04/2013 15:18	LW
Post-interviews -enabling factors RP	17	84	23/04/2013 15:16	LW
Pre-interview use RP	20	26	01/06/2013 12:49	LW
pre-interview using reflective practice	7	15	23/04/2013 15:10	LW
Pre-interviews - benefits	19	24	23/04/2013 15:09	LW
Pre-interviews - Constraints - RP	20	34	23/04/2013 15:17	LW
Pre-interviews - enabling factors RP	18	65	23/04/2013 15:15	LW
Pre-interviews- definitions - RP	20	21	23/04/2013 15:22	LW
Qualities of Practitioner	15	51	16/04/2012 11:05	LW
Reflective journals	0	0	08/07/2012 13:44	LW
Reflective Practice and outcomes for familie	7	9	07/04/2012 15:44	LW
Training and reflective practice	10	11	07/04/2012 15:47	LW
Unprofessional behaviour	7	12	16/04/2012 11:07	LW

**Appendix N - Example of baseline interview nodes stored in Nvivo system**

Interviews (Baseline)

Name	Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified Or
	30	56	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	22	41	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	09/04/2012
	41	112	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	40	62	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	11/04/2012
	39	108	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	41	83	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	36	46	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	53	118	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	09/04/2012
	45	136	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	11/04/2012
	43	77	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	11/04/2012
	55	98	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	12/04/2012
	38	81	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	24	27	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	11	12	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	32	42	24/03/2012 14:23	LW	24/03/2012
	38	51	26/03/2012 10:22	LW	26/03/2012
	42	61	26/03/2012 10:22	LW	26/03/2012
	25	31	26/03/2012 10:22	LW	26/03/2012
	42	62	26/03/2012 10:22	LW	26/03/2012
	34	53	26/03/2012 10:27	LW	11/04/2012

**Appendix O - Example of follow-up interview nodes stored using Nvivo**

Interviews - follow-up professional

Name	Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified
[Redacted]	38	63	15/06/2012 11:18	LW	15/06/2012 11:18
[Redacted]	43	81	02/07/2012 12:04	LW	02/07/2012 12:04
[Redacted]	36	97	10/07/2012 10:18	LW	10/07/2012 10:18
[Redacted]	33	93	10/07/2012 10:18	LW	10/07/2012 10:18
[Redacted]	18	32	16/07/2012 20:14	LW	16/07/2012 20:14
[Redacted]	19	54	21/08/2012 09:33	LW	22/08/2012 09:33
[Redacted]	22	45	21/08/2012 09:33	LW	21/08/2012 09:33
[Redacted]	49	75	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	30/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	37	82	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	03/07/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	44	69	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	27/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	49	93	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	02/07/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	25	57	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	28/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	51	93	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	28/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	50	112	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	28/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	35	71	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	30/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	42	73	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	27/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	40	89	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	28/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	44	93	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	28/04/2012 15:14
[Redacted]	37	62	27/04/2012 15:14	LW	27/04/2012 15:14

***Appendix P - Example of interview nodes stored using Nvivo***

Interviews Managers

 Name	 Nodes	References	Created On	Created By	Modified
 [Redacted]	31	97	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	22	50	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	33	59	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	9	14	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	25	49	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	14	18	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	28	54	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	14	16	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	26	72	24/03/2012 14:55	LW	24/03/2012 14:55
 [Redacted]	19	29	14/04/2012 17:38	LW	14/04/2012 17:38

## ***Appendix Q - Outline of Research Study***

### **“An exploration of the value of reflective practice for child care and family support service provision”**

#### **Introduction:**

This research study represents an exciting opportunity to investigate and gain insight into the implementation, value and effectiveness of utilising “Reflective Practice” in the field of family support and child care service provision. Whilst there is a considerable volume of descriptive literature in relation to the subject of Reflective Practice, there has been relatively little research undertaken exploring the value and benefits of utilising this approach. This research study can address this gap in the current literature and generate new knowledge and understanding about this important aspect of child care work and interventions. The following is an outline of the proposed study.

#### **Aims and objectives of the study**

The aim of this research study is to test the hypothesis that the effective implementation of Reflective Practice, in a social care and family support setting, requires a rigorous, systematic and structured method/model of implementation to maximise its use. The study also aims to assess the broader impact and value of utilising Reflective Practice in terms of the enhancement of practice knowledge and skills and the improvements that families experience from practitioners who employ interventions that are informed by Reflective Practice. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To critically review and analyse both national and international literature in relation to Reflective Practice
2. To test the hypothesis that the effective implementation of Reflective Practice requires a structured and systematic method/model of implementation
3. To explore the usefulness and benefits to families and children of practitioners utilising Reflective Practice in the context of family support service intervention and service provision
4. To elicit the views and experiences of service users who receive interventions from Reflective Practitioners
5. To elicit the views and experiences of practitioners who utilise Reflective Practice in the development of interventions with young people and families

6. To describe and locate the concept of Reflective Practice in its theoretical, policy, practice and service setting

### **Brief outline of study:**

To gain insight and knowledge regarding the value, benefits and effectiveness of utilising Reflective Practice in the context of Family Support and Social care service provision, the following research methodology will be employed and developed with practitioners and service users over.

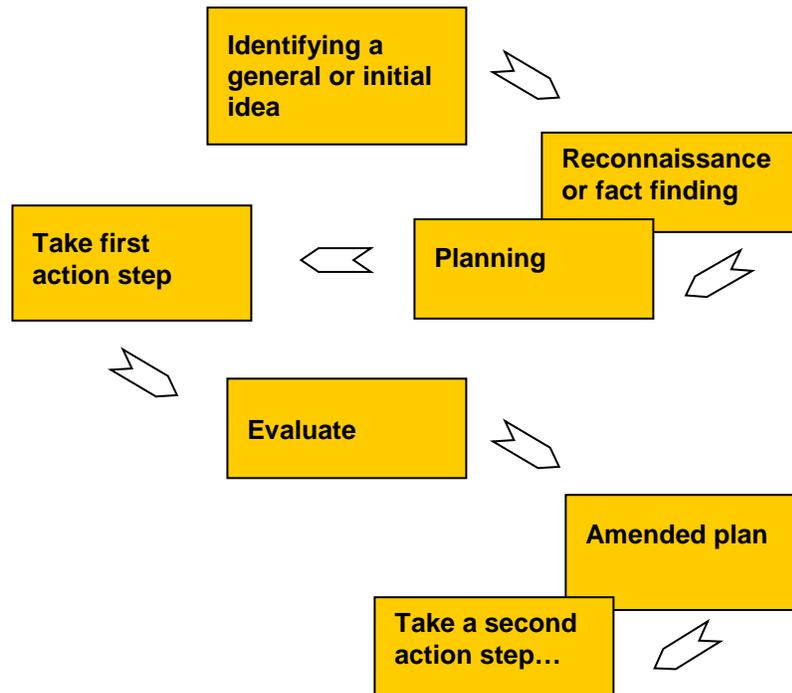
Twenty social care practitioners will be randomly selected and invited to participate in the study. This group of twenty practitioners will then be randomly split into two cohort subgroups of ten. **Cohort group (a)** will be provided with training, by the researcher, to implement the Johns model of Reflective Practice. Participants in this cohort group will be asked to implement and utilise the Johns model for a duration of one year with families with whom they are working. The researcher will check-in with individual practitioners in this cohort group during the year, however, support offered will be minimal. **Cohort group (b)**, also consisting of ten practitioners will also be trained up in the use of the Johns Model of Reflective Practice. However, cohort group (b) will be invited to participate in a process using Action Research to implement the Johns Reflective model over the course of one year. The use of action research methodology will involve a more rigorous, systematic and searching implementation of the Johns Reflective model. This implementation will be more structured and rigorously applied with cohort group (b). The use of Action Research methodology will enable the researcher to test the hypothesis that the effective utilisation of Reflective Practice requires structure, rigour and practitioner support. Throughout the study the researcher will observe and investigate the experiences of both cohort groups. At the conclusion of the study, individual participants from both groups will be interviewed about their experience of using the Johns Reflective Model and their perceptions of using the reflective process. Particular attention will be paid to the reported benefits, value, effectiveness and learning potential involved.

The views of families who received services from Reflective Practitioners - one family per practitioner in each cohort group - will also be recruited. This service user feedback is an important aspect of the research in that it enables families to articulate their experiences and their perception of receiving services/intervention from reflective practitioners. Individual interviews will be conducted with families to elicit their views regarding the value, benefits and effectiveness of reflective interventions. Family involvement will of course be subject to their voluntary participation and will also be with the agreement of the agency working with the family.

**Time Frame Initial Steps of Research Study:**

It is anticipated that random selection of research participants into Cohort groups (a) and (b) will be completed by March 2010. It is proposed to make individual contact with each participant and confirm their availability and commitment to the research process before the end of March 2010. An individual interview with each participant will then be undertaken. By mid-April 2010 a training session will follow with all the participants in Cohort (a). The researcher will present to Cohort (a) an outline of the study. This will be delivered by PowerPoint presentation. Any queries or questions will be addressed during training sessions. Agreement will be firmed up that the researcher will contact individual group members during the course of the year. During this session the researcher will issue journals to the research participants and confirm that a follow-up individual interview process will be arranged in approximately one year.

By April 2010, and following individual interviews with each participant in Cohort (b) an initial meeting will be convened by the researcher with this collective grouping. The researcher will provide an outline and description of the study. This will be delivered by PowerPoint presentation. This presentation will also outline and explain the Action Research methodology to be utilised in the study. During this initial session the researcher will outline the parameters of the study, e.g. that the focus of the study will be on the issue of Reflective Practice and that the Johns Model of Reflective Practice will be utilised. The next steps pertaining to this grouping will then be agreed as per Action Research methodology. This will include ground rules for the group, research questions, agreement re training group in respect of the Johns model, and use of reflective journals. The next session and agenda will then be agreed with cohort group (b). Following this initial session, the Action Research methodology and spiral approach will apply. As problems and issues emerge in relation to the use and implementation of the Johns Model of Reflective Practice, these matters will be addressed and systematically resolved and the problem-solving spiral will proceed until no further identified issues or problems emerge. The spiral and problem-solving approach described is captured in the following diagram designed by Kurt Lewin (1948).



All individual interviews and group discussions with both cohort groups (a) and (b) will be transcribed by the researcher. This initial short-term timeframe will fit into an overarching time schedule for the overall study.

Liam White  
PhD Research Student  
National University of Ireland  
Galway.

***Appendix R - Participant letter of consent***

Research interview in relation to the PhD study of reflective practice.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ gave my consent to participate in an interview with researcher, Liam White, in relation to his PhD Thesis that will explore the value of utilising reflective practice in the context of family support and child care service provision. I agree that the contents of this interview may be used for the purposes of informing this research study.

Liam White  
PhD Researcher,  
National University of Ireland,  
Galway.

## Appendix S - Extracts from Reflective Journal literature

demonstrate the skills necessary to the reflective cycle – self-awareness, description, critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Atkins and Murphy 1993).

Keeping a journal enabled me to enter into a dialogue between my objective and subjective self and it transformed my feeling self into a spectator and analyst of my own personal professional drama (Street 1985). Street (1985) writes that journalling provides the reflector with a process for meta-theorising, that is, thinking about the processes of thinking. This significantly developed not only my skills of reflection but also my skills as a learner in general, moving me away from my previously held attitude that knowledge (and not necessarily enhanced learning skills) was the goal to be achieved.

Some people like to tell their stories whilst others prefer to write them. Indeed, many practitioners get stuck between telling their story and writing it. It is as if they hit a mental block. Perhaps the oral telling is more spontaneous whilst writing is more considered, more cognitive, more self-conscious. I sense the presence of an internal censor at work in writing that tries to fit the description into learned ways of writing that dismiss or denigrate feelings and imagination. Whatever, some people struggle to write. Perhaps telling stories is essentially a creative right brain act whilst writing is essentially a left brain activity and between the two sides of the brain, the connections are fuzzy and censored. If so, the practitioner may need guidance to release the imaginative and creative power into her writing.

Schön (1983) suggests a difficulty even in saying what we know, that much of our knowing is tacit and not easily explainable.

When we go about the spontaneous intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a certain way. Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at loss or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our doing. (p49)

Spontaneous writing taps the tacit; it brings it to the surface like a bubbling underground brook. Holly (1989:71) notes that 'writing taps the unconscious; it can make the implicit explicit, and therefore open to analysis'. It is bringing feelings and thoughts to the surface where they can be looked at. Ferruci (1982:41) says:

Writing ... can be much more powerful than we may think at first ... we should not be surprised that unconscious material surfaces so readily in our writing though that may surface all sorts of demons that we may prefer to keep quiet.

Ben Okri (1997:22) writes:

The creative self has one side facing the dark waters, and the other side facing the bright and joyful firmament. Paradoxically, it flows into all things: and your spirit, in approaching it, should be able to flow into all things, all thoughts, all possible realities. Do not disdain the idle, strange, ordinary, nonsensical, or shocking thoughts the mind throws up. Hold them. Look at them. Play with them. See where they lead. Every perception or possibility has its own life-span: some have short lives, others keep growing, and may open to infusions of greater life.

The emphasis on the creative side is such a vital perspective on writing. It should be approached with a playful and creative spirit. IT is YOU! In writing, you are writing

yourself, your body, nurturing your precious and unique self. In writing, you change yourself on a subliminal level. As Ferruci (1982:42) says, 'It is like cutting a new pathway in a jungle'.

### In the quiet evening

Although I usually carry my reflective journal around with me in my briefcase, I most often write my reflections in the evening when I can dwell with my thoughts and consider the events of the past few days with less distraction than at work. Even the most ordinary events have great significance for the mindful practitioner. Everyday experiences are a source of rich learning. Reflective writing brings events into focus, enabling the journal to act as a midwife, giving birth to new understanding (Pinar 1981). Yet, interestingly, I rarely reflect on my educational work as a university lecturer, at least in a written format. Part of the reason for this is that I use my practice reflections as educational material and research activity. I like to teach the palliative care students 'around the camp-fire' – where I share my own stories of palliative care to trigger stories in others and to role model the art of reflective writing.

So ask yourself – how might you write?

#### Reflective activity

Think of the last time you were at work. Now think about one particular situation. It needn't be dramatic. It can simply be something mundane or ordinary, something you wouldn't normally give a second thought – something you did that on the surface was unproblematic.

Now write a description of this situation for 15 minutes. Try not to take your pen off the paper. Try not to stop and think too much about the why's of the situation. Just let the pen flow, paying attention to detail, drawing on all your senses.

***Appendix T - Baseline interview Schedule***

**(1) What is your profession?**

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.....  
.....

**(2) How long have you been qualified?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(3) How long have you been working in child care?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(4) What is your current job title?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(5) How would you describe your agency/service e.g.**

*Family Support*  *Child Protection*  *Children in Care*  *Other*

.....  
.....  
.....

**(6) How many families do you have on your current caseload?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(7) How often do you get formal supervision?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(8) What is your understanding of “Reflective Practice”?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(9) Have you received any formal training in “Reflective Practice”?  
In college or through work related training courses?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(10) Are you aware of any models of “Reflective Practice”?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(11) Do you utilise “Reflective Practice” in your own work?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(12) How would you describe your “Reflective Practice”?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(13) Are you aware of any policy documents that relate to “Reflective Practice”  
in your current job?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(14) What do you think are the benefits of utilising “Reflective Practice” for practitioners and families?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**(15) What would help you be a “Reflective Practitioner”?**

.....  
.....  
.....