

# Reflective Practice in Child Protection: A Practice Perspective

Contributed by Kelly Dundon

When I thought about my experience and methods of using reflective practice, I wondered how I would ever be able to articulate and make sense of the complex, critical, and sometimes deep and painful thoughts that underpin my practice in front line child protection. Eventually I came to the realization that we all do a certain amount of reflective and critical practice on many differing levels. We can easily find time to reflect before, during, and after events, from the superficial to extensive and through our personal to professional lives.

Reflection allows us to plan, articulate, evaluate, exact change, and perhaps more importantly, learn in the complex issues that we face daily. As part of our working with often disordered and dysfunctional children and families, with reflection, we are able to positively work toward best outcomes and in the best interests of the children with whom we work.

The importance of thinking reflectively, that is to break down and closely analyze the processes that occur in decision making, in child protection, I believe is an essential part of our role. Doing so helps us to develop a sense of what has been achieved, what is likely to be achieved, and what could be done better, the importance of which has long been evaluated by many writers, including Schon (1983), Johns (1996, 2000), and more recently Rolfe (2001) and Fook (2002). As students, child protection practitioners, and later in our careers as practice teachers, leaders, and in helping to shape policy, we are able with the methods of reflective practice to conclude, inform, and broaden our practice knowledge.

I began to understand the importance of utilizing the tools that were available to me long before I knew what it was actually called. In 1998, I grappled with being a broke student and 21-year-old single mother of two. I juggled diaper changing and textbooks and felt overwhelmed with the demands that were either placed upon me, or that I had placed upon myself. I needed a way to make sense of it all, so I began to write a few lines every night about my placement, theories and methods, thoughts, fears, and achievements. This helped me to really focus on what the issues were. Not being a natural academic, I found this very useful. About a month later in a seminar, I learned that I had been documenting my learning experience and that this was an essential tool for every student. I have now kept eight years of practice diaries—all strictly confidential, of course, but boy, you should read the contents! Some are highly emotional and not very productive excerpts. Others are productive and insightful. It is pleasing to see one's sense of self develop over time.

I look at how I, and others around me, have grown in competence and thoughtfulness through this process. I can clearly see that at the end of each time we really think about what we are doing, there is what I call an "awakening"—the sudden realization that we are on the right or wrong track, that we can do this very difficult job. I see the clarity, harmony, and satisfaction. When I feel this way, it is almost as if I have lifted above the situation. I am able to see below and think laterally about the potential impacts of my actions, before, during, and after an event. I add that a major part of working in child protection is the responsibility placed upon us as practitioners and team leaders to make good decisions. We can, with reflection, be able to accurately describe in progress notes and through assessments what has led us to our decisions and critically analyze our practice without feeling the burden of blame.

## A Model for Reflection

Borton's Developmental Model for Reflective Practice, developed as early as 1970, is of great interest to me. The framework works in a sequential and cyclical order and is very easy to follow and recommended for first-time reflective practice. Borton's (1970) model looks at three levels of reflection—What? So what? and Now what?

He starts with a descriptive level of reflection, which he calls the "what." An example is: What is the issue/problem? What was my role? What was mine and others' response to the actions taken? Then we move to "So what?" This concentrates on the theory and knowledge building level of reflection: So, what does this tell or teach me about my service user, about myself, about the model of care that I am providing? So, what did I base my actions on and what was going through my mind as I acted upon them? So, what could I have done differently? So, what is my new understanding of this situation? "Now what?" looks at what we can now do to break the cycle and to improve the situation in the future. The broader issues now need to be examined if this action is now to be successful. Once we have done all this, we can look at the end of this cycle by asking ourselves: Now what might be the consequences of this action?

When opening one's mind to using a model such as Borton's, and particularly with practitioners who are new to reflection, I find that a very simple exercise is to concentrate on something like what happened at breakfast this morning and to really start to pick apart the events—why certain things occurred and others didn't, and so forth.

## Other Models

I also see great value in drawing or mapping situations that are complex and in need of a good sorting out. In one of my previous positions, we used a visual mapping technique in looking at one particular child whose needs were complex. The map was huge. It covered a wall. Everyone really got into drawing and describing different ideas over the course of about a week. This type of free association whet many an appetite and allowed us to think creatively and outside of the boxes that we can often get stuck in when working in child protection.

Having spoken to many workers involved in child protection, I have found that we all have different ways and levels in

which we reflect. Some use a log, mapping techniques, and supervision or verbal accounts and discussions within teams to thrash out the problems to get differing opinions and ideas. You may ask a colleague to play devil's advocate and question your beliefs, values, and attitudes about, say, drug affected parenting. We can, with this level of discussion, learn a great deal from each other and ourselves. We can closely examine and reflect upon our fears, discriminations, power relations, values, and beliefs. We can also examine the ripple effects of these issues for our service users and the wider community setting.

### Why Reflect?

I can think of many different reasons to keep reflecting upon what we do. First, we are in the business of protecting children. We need to be clear that we do protect children and ourselves when we are in the field. A little bit of thought and planning now may be of huge benefit later. Something that I have found is that reflection seems to create a certain clarity and sense of safety around this business we are in. The log I use is a very safe way of offloading and debriefing myself, as well as discussions with colleagues and managers. It enables me to avoid stress and vicarious trauma. It helps me to move forward from anger and frustration at service users, colleagues, departments, policy, and red tape toward a certain inner peace! It helps me to understand why I feel this way, why it needs to be this way, and how what I do could potentially change this situation positively, I guess from negative energy to positive energy or something like that. By doing this we can go a long way toward keeping well at work, which affects our service delivery and ultimately the way in which we do our business with children.

The constant weight of workload pressure and prioritization is often of concern to us as child protection workers. It is easy to get caught in the overwhelming feeling of drowning in paperwork, children with high needs, and balancing risk like a trapeze artist. When we feel this way, to sit quietly in a park for five minutes and briefly run through the priorities, we can look at how we can work smarter, perhaps delegate tasks to families, therefore empowering them and including them in planning for children. In the wider spectrum, we can look at how we can establish a work-life balance, while still getting through all tasks and complying. A balance is possible with some thought, care, and of course, departmental policy, which positively supports work-life balance and understands its importance in terms of overall success and health of its work force and work practices.

Second, instead of finding ourselves bogged down with constraints, if we are serious about our roles as corporate parents, we can truly focus on the children we serve and what would be in the best interests for that child, even if what we think would be the best solution is not possible. We have thought through the "what ifs." We can evidence this through formal and ad-hoc supervision and case notes. When an adult seeks information on his childhood file, if he can clearly see the efforts that were made to keep him within his family or the reflective practice and decision-making that led to his removal, this may be part of his healing process, and we have helped to identify to him what the department is, why we do what we do, our mistakes, and how we have learned and developed over time, a transparency about child protection.

We can encourage others to utilize reflection by offering consultation papers, questionnaires, and service user groups to empower our staff groups, children, and families. The benefits of reflection in terms of collaborative practice with other agencies and wider communities opens many doors to our understanding of roles and responsibilities, and it can be critical in removing boundaries and stopping us from blaming others. We must seek to empower others around us to take personal responsibility for reflection, for speaking up and letting people know what we think and why through this process.

Another part of reflection is being able to use the criticism we face and utilize it—that is, turn the situation on its head, and learn something positive from it. Instead of being defensive and subjective, we can learn and move forward. I acknowledge, through my own experience, that this healing process may take time, especially if we are particularly wounded by a scathing remark or insult in our work practices, but it is possible.

We are also able to establish boundaries when working with children, something that is often assumed that we can automatically do, although it does take experience, time, and skill. When a worker does over-identify with a client, this can be a negative experience for the provider and user. If we find the ability, through reflection, to step back and look at the bigger picture, we are able to work more effectively with a service user.

In conclusion, the importance of critical and reflective practice is difficult to measure and often under-estimated, yet it is crucial to our professional and personal development. More important, I feel that reflection helps and prepares us to be accountable and responsible for the very difficult decisions and challenges we often face in child protection and allows us to make good choices and have better outcomes for children.

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