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## Critical reflection workshops and knowledge exchange

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## **Critical reflection workshops and knowledge exchange: findings from a Scottish project**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In 2013, academics from a Scottish university came together with social work managers and practitioners from two local authorities (LAs) in Scotland to run a knowledge exchange (KE) project co-sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council and the LAs. The project's aim was an ambitious one: to contribute to culture change in the children and families' departments in the two partner agencies. The project grew out of an earlier KE venture that had explored ways of engaging better with involuntary service users in social work; it thus both anticipated and reflected wider concerns about services for children that were also demonstrated in Munro's Review of Child Protection. The KE project had three components: training for managers, practitioner research projects and critical reflection workshops. Whether, and to what degree, the KE project changed culture is not the focus of this paper, which is written jointly by academic researchers and practitioners. Instead, one element of the KE project, namely the critical reflection workshops, is discussed. Findings provide strong evidence of the pressures currently experienced by children and families' services in the UK public sector. They also indicate how important good relationships are in building meaningful KE.

**Keywords:** children and families' social work, critical reflection, knowledge exchange, social work, culture change, organizational change

## **INTRODUCTION**

Much has been written in recent years about the use of critical reflection in social work (Fook & Askeland 2007; Fook & Gardner 2007, 2013), with attention being given to the potential for critical reflection to contribute to the development of 'learning organisations' (Gould 2004; Gould & Baldwin 2004). This paper discusses critical reflection within a knowledge exchange (KE) project that ran from February to November 2013 at a Scottish university, supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) with matched funding from two local authority (LA) partners, both of which had worked with the university on a previous KE project. The focus of the first KE project had been to explore how statutory agencies might engage better with involuntary service users in social work (Gallagher et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2011; Gallagher et al. 2012). The new project had a different and arguably more ambitious aim: to contribute to a change in culture in the way that public services are delivered to families identified as in need or at risk in the two council areas.

## **METHODS**

KE has been called 'a dynamic, ongoing, two-way interaction and flow of ideas and people between colleges and universities and business, public and third sector organisations' (Research Councils UK 2006; Scottish Funding Council 2009, p. 3). Beyond this broad definition, there are many ways of 'doing KE' (Walter et al. 2004).

Our project began with a number of assumptions, each built from our own and others' experience of running KE projects. The first assumption was that it would not be enough to engage with only social work practitioners if we were to see any real changes organizationally (Drumm 2012). Instead, we also had to target the leaders, both middle and higher managers, who would have the authority to put into place mechanisms to allow a change process to unfold (or not) and who would support practitioners to change (or not), both during and after the KE project had ended (Macrae & Skinner 2011). Our second assumption was that the practitioners who took part should be volunteers who chose to take part, not nominated by their managers (as in a staff development exercise) or a 'sample', as in a research project. To maximize 'buy in' and demonstrate our belief in co-production (Armstrong & Alsop 2010), all participants were volunteers, each with their own expert knowledge to bring.

Our third assumption was that people learn in different ways: that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would not work (Entwistle & Ramsden 1983; Cree 2005), hence the need for an element of choice for the practitioners who chose to take part in the 'Changing Culture' project. Again, the decision about what to offer practitioners rested on previous knowledge and experience. We knew from our first KE project and from wider research that social workers get a lot out of carrying out their own research projects when they are supported to do so (Gallagher et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2011; Gallagher et al. 2012). We therefore decided to make practitioner research a key component of the new project, with research training and mentoring being offered simultaneously (Gallagher et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2011; Gallagher et al. 2012). Critical reflection workshops were added to the mix because long-standing

evidence shows that these provide an opportunity for practitioners to discuss their work in an open, non-blaming atmosphere; an essential starting point for any exploration of professional practice (Schon 1983; Fook & Gardner 2007). Thirdly, we knew that time available for this project was limited: limited by the budget and limited by the competing demands that social workers inevitably have on their time and attention. What we offered had to be flexible; it also had to balance the exigencies of the 'real world' of practice alongside the need for academic rigour. The end-result was that the KE project was a compromise between what we might ideally like to have achieved (e.g. consistent attendance at all the research training events or the critical reflection workshops) and what could be achieved (i.e. 100% commitment, but less than 100% attendance).

We cannot, at this stage, offer an evaluation of how far the KE project achieved our wider aspiration to change culture in children and families' social work because, as is widely acknowledged, changing culture in organizations takes time. In reviewing the evidence, Drumm (2012) estimated that five years is a reasonable timescale for this. We can, however, offer provisional observations from our shared perspectives. These chime completely with recent research evidence on child protection and give added weight to campaigns being waged across the UK for a new direction in social work with children and families (e.g. Munro 2011; Blyth 2014; Featherstone et al., 2014). Before turning to our findings, we will first place our KE project in its wider context, in social work practice and in critical reflection literature.

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILIES' SOCIAL WORK UNDER SIEGE**

There can be no more apposite time to be writing about children and families' social work in the UK, and more specifically, the culture of LA children and families' services. The death of yet another child in 2013 (4-year-old Daniel Pelka) again catapulted social work and child care to the top of the public agenda, and yet another social work manager felt it is necessary to resign. Familiar questions re-emerged: how could this happen? Whose responsibility was it to intervene? What was social work's role? What could and should have been done to prevent this? These are the issues that have challenged social work at least since 1973, when 7-year-old Maria Colwell was killed by her stepfather. Since then, social work with children and families began to assume a predominantly child protection focus (Parton 1984), in spite of various attempts to refocus practice away from narrow child protection concerns towards broader family support roles in recognition of the importance of preventive work (see, e.g. Department of Health 1995). More recently, academic commentators have suggested that in a climate where risk discourses dominate (Webb 2006), social work practice remains stubbornly fixed upon child protection and cases that reflect primarily child and family welfare concerns are often processed through a child protection route (Wastell et al. 2010; Pithouse et al. 2011). This has led to a significant net-widening within child protection (Parton 1999) and, it is asserted, child protection systems that have become overly bureaucratic and procedural. Lonne et al. (2009) have gone as far as to conclude that the system is 'close to bankrupt (and) it may be doing more harm than good' (p. 5).

Two recent reviews of social work have pointed out the need for transformation in social work practice in the UK. In Scotland, the *Changing Lives*, the Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review (Scottish Executive 2006), identified a social work profession lacking in confidence in its own skills and unclear about its distinctive contribution as a profession. Social workers interviewed for the review described a lack of professional autonomy; they felt constrained by management arrangements that required an escalation of decision-making up a 'line management' chain. The report concluded that social work had lost touch with some of its core purpose and it called for transformational culture change across the profession. The need for such change in children and families' services assumes particular resonance in the wake of the UK government-sponsored *Review of Child Protection in England and Wales* conducted by Professor Eileen Munro (2011). This review called for fundamental change in child protection practice and culture. While the Munro Review's remit did not extend to Scotland, the issues it identified are familiar to Scottish social work practice. Significantly for our work, Munro points out the need to 'help professionals move from a compliance culture to a learning culture' (p. 6).

Our KE project reflected a desire on the part of our two local authority partners to do things differently. This was not a hidden agenda; on the contrary, it was expressed openly and senior managers from both authorities saw the project as offering support to a change programme that had already begun. One of the authorities had set up a children's social work practice panel, with representation from the university. The senior manager explains further in an online newsletter:

It was time to move on to a more ambitious agenda. At its centre was our commitment to intervene in the lives of vulnerable children to achieve the most positive impact possible. We moved from a preoccupation with budgets, KPIs (key performance indicators) and organizational structure (which had been very much necessary in order to improve performance on the basics) to addressing how we as managers could improve social work practice in Edinburgh.

(Andy Jeffries, <http://edinburghbrightfutures.com/2013/07/31/creating-a-learning-culture-in-childrens-social-work-2/>)

## **CRITICAL REFLECTION WORKSHOPS: BACKGROUND AND PROCESS**

Critical reflection is an approach to staff development and learning that has been used in social work and health-care settings across the world over the last 20 years or so. It builds on traditions of reflection, reflective practice, reflexivity and critical perspectives that have emanated in education in particular; social work academic Jan Fook has been a champion of the use of this approach in social work, and it was to the work of Fook and her colleagues that we turned in developing our own approach to the critical reflection workshops.

### **The critical reflection process**

Fook & Askeland (2007) suggested that critical reflection offers a process of analysing practice in order to reframe that practice in a way that represents the complexity and integrated nature of that experience. It involves small peer groups in working together to

assist one another to reflect on 'critical incidents', i.e. specific and concrete examples of practice that are seen by practitioners to be significant. Fook & Askeland pointed out that the identification of some-thing as 'significant' must come from the practitioner her or himself. Learning then takes place as the group members unpack the incident, unearthing deep-seated cultural norms as well as unspoken values and assumptions. The 'primary purpose' of critical reflection is, they assert, 'bringing about some improvements in professional practice' (p. 521). This is not, then, simply an exercise in introspection:

Ultimately, through critical reflection on deep assumptions, especially about the social world and the individual person's connection with it, a person should be able to become more empowered in acting within and upon her or his social world (p. 522).

## **Our workshops**

We began the critical reflection process by sending out invitations via the managers who had already 'signed up' to be part of the larger KE project. Social workers in the children and families' teams were invited to self-nominate to participate in a series of five workshops over a period of three months between April and June 2013, to be led by two social work academics. Each workshop lasted for 4 hours, and followed the same pattern each time. We began with coffee and a general review and catch-up, as well as a discussion of research literature provided in advance, largely, but not exclusively, by the academic staff. We then moved onto the critical incident or incidents, when practitioners shared their accounts with the group, facilitated by the academics. Time was left for written individual reflection and review following this, using a pro forma designed by the academics for this purpose. Workshops ended with lunch and another open conversation. Participants were invited to meet us again in October 2013 for a session to review themes emerging from the workshops and plan dissemination. Following this, all the critical reflectors attended the KE project's final event in November 2013, when findings from the three strands were presented by both academics and practitioners.

## **Membership of the workshops**

Fourteen social workers expressed interest in taking part initially, 10 from one LA and 4 from the other, reflecting the relative size of the LA's and the amount of financial contribution each had made to the project. In the end, 12 social workers took part: 8 from the first LA and 4 from the second LA. Four social workers returned to the follow-up session with the two academics; two spoke at the dissemination event and four contributed to this paper.

The practitioners represented a mix of background, age-and-stage, and gender and agency context. Some were newly qualified social workers, whereas others had been social workers for a number of years and were now working at senior levels in their organizations. Some had moved onto specialist posts within their LAs; one was approaching retirement. Eight were women and four were men; 10 were of white UK ethnicity, 1 was white (other European) and 1 was of a Scottish Asian background. The two academics were white

Scottish, female and male, both with considerable experience in social work with children and families before entering academia some years previously.

### **Our approach to the workshops**

Our approach from the outset was to encourage the social workers to see themselves, with us, as 'learners', not practitioners. We wanted to distance them from any other experience they had of talking about their 'cases' in groups; this was to be an opportunity for learning, not supervision. This meant that in discussing the critical incidents, we encouraged the participants to listen without comment before asking questions, and we moved conversation away from 'problem solving' to critical analysis, thus reminding everyone (ourselves included) that the focus was group learning, not group supervision.

We also wanted social workers to 'own' this as 'their' time and 'their' learning, not something that was being imposed on them by managers. We set about achieving this in a number of ways: by inviting participants to apply to become university 'visitors', a status that gave them access to the library, and probably more significantly, to online journals; by asking them to provide personal email addresses in addition to work ones, in the sure knowledge that some online content we might wish to share would be prohibited by LA online security systems; by booking a venue and catering that was not just satisfactory, but was of a high quality. (We used two of the university's oldest and most prestigious rooms, a detail that did not go unnoticed by all the participants who told us how much they appreciated being treated as 'special guests' of the university.)

In reflecting on our approach to critical reflection, it is evident that while drawing on the work of Fook and others, this was not a replica of Fook & Gardner's (2007) model in key ways. Most notably, time was restricted and because of this, there was little opportunity for a separation between 'Phase 1' and 'Phase 2' reflection, as outlined by Fook and Gardner; rather or instead, we did a bit of both each time we met. The other significant difference was that the group membership was not consistent. In spite of all of our best efforts to sustain continuity, participation rates amounted to 8 people for four of the sessions and 10 for the middle session. Because of this, the sessions had to be complete entities in their own right, and the group boundaries needed to be fluid enough to cope with a changing population.

### **CRITICAL REFLECTION WORKSHOPS: FINDINGS**

The central question in gauging the success or otherwise of the critical reflection workshops is to what degree, if any, they were able to contribute to a culture change agenda in the two participating local authority departments? Our answer is, unsurprisingly, inconclusive, for a number of interconnected reasons. Firstly, the critical reflection workshops were, as already explained, part of a larger KE package; separating out the impact of one from the others will be extremely difficult to prove, even should we wish to do so (and there are strong reasons why the package should be assessed as a whole as this is how it was envisaged in the first place). We have now conducted a follow-up evaluation of the KE project as a whole and will

report on this once our analysis is completed. Secondly, it is simply too early to tell if the workshops (or the larger project) have had an impact in anything but the short term. As already noted, we may need to wait five years to be certain that culture change has really taken place (Drumm 2012). Additionally, it will always be difficult to demonstrate change in terms of one initiative even in the longer term because there is always so much change taking place within organizations at the same time (Martin 2002; Morton & Flemming 2013).

In spite of these words of caution, we do have some- thing to say, both about how children and families' departments are currently working in Scotland, and about the critical reflection process itself. As already described, we kept a weekly record of what people were sharing in the groups and in their individual reflections. An evaluation form was also completed at the end of the last workshop, and following this, a post-workshop review discussion (which discussed the main themes from the workshops and planned the dissemination) was audio-recorded and transcribed in full. All these materials were examined and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke 2006), and in doing so, three broad findings emerged, which concern practice, organizations and learning; it is to these that we now turn.

### **Findings about practice**

The critical reflection workshops demonstrated that children and families' social work practice in local authority social work is still procedural, risk-averse and focused more on the assessment of problems than on prevention or support. As one social worker said in a workshop:

Even post-Munro, some local authorities appear to be clinging to performance-linked targets, rigid time-scales etc. as a means of improving child safety, when this runs counter to relationship-based social work. (25 April 2013)

But this was not the whole story. Just as significantly, all of the social workers expressed care and concern for those with whom they worked. We heard stories of compassion, and on one striking occasion, of what one social worker identified as 'love', as she told us about the relationship she had built with a kinship carer over many years, a person she found infuriating and difficult to work with at times, but for whom she also expressed love. This was interesting because, as Smith & Smith (2001) described, it can be difficult to acknowledge strong emotions:

When we enter into more bureaucratic arenas, helping tends to be stripped of much of its moral dimension and utility. It also loses touch with a great deal of the supporting language and thinking. Words like boundary, client, delivery, intervention and outcome replace the discourse of friendship, association, relationship and faith (pp. 153–4).

All of the social workers railed against the media characterization of social workers as naïve and overly optimistic, which is often (incorrectly) attributed to Dingwall *et al.* (1983). Their view was that social workers must remain optimistic, but in a critical way; they coined the term 'critical optimism' as a helpful approach to social work in child protection in the future. One practitioner describes this more fully:

I hold the concept of "cultivating uncertainty" (Staemmler 1997) in mind as a tool to support me



when I am entangled in the chaos. The resonance of others' stories with my own experience, and the risk taken to show emotion in relation to these anecdotes, inspired a sense of care and relationship building in me, and I imagine within the group. I would embrace the support of "critical optimism" as an equal to unpacking the "what is?" element to experience. For example, the feeling of fear, joy or separation that may be around in relation to a specific field dynamic, and then learning what this means for me in action as a practitioner. (29 May 2013)

Another social worker spoke for many when she said, '[We] need to be mindful of the limits of the social work role – that all our services and input can't necessarily "save" or "fix" a child or make them happy' (11 April 2013). This is a realistic social work practice, as well as a profoundly honest one. She continued:

I will use the question of how much am I being a "rescuer" in social work – do we take too much responsibility? And question "which client" I am working with more frequently. (11 April)

### **Findings about social work organizations**

The critical reflection workshops gave us access not only to narratives of social work practice but also to the workings of social work agencies. We learned about what it is like to work in a call centre (literally), with 'hot-desking' and a personal space allocation for storage purposes of one linear metre or two-thirds of a linear metre for a part-time staff member. This was a social work practice that relied upon computers, telephones and driving to meet clients, whereas travel budgets were being restricted and vacant posts unfilled. This echoes descriptions by other commentators about social work as it has developed where 'the way in which power is imagined and exercised in late or liquid modernity is to the exclusion of any human contact at all' (Ferguson 2004, p. 213).

We heard accounts of the day-to-day impact of managerialism and public service cutbacks, of integration that was not working and of a social work profession that felt undermined, undervalued and under attack, from government, the media, service users and the general public. None of this was new: in fact, it was a depressingly familiar account, seen in other studies of social work, particularly in England (Lonne *et al.* 2009; Blyth 2014; Featherstone *et al.* 2014) but one that has been told less often about Scottish social services. Any number of illustrations of this can be found, repeated throughout the workshops. Here are just two, written by two practitioners in one of the written end-of-session reflections:

I learned today about how structures of social work impact on practice, particularly the negative ways in which practitioners are constrained in their ability to engage positively with clients. This leads to our need to support families being compromised by organisational demands. Also the role of social work in wider society: is "child protection" really helping?

I am absorbing a lot of frustration about systems in place and recognising how inflexible policies/procedures are in working alongside/with families. I feel powerless to change this. My employers are asking for one thing and behaving in a different way. (25 April 2013)

What came through in all the critical incidents is that social workers continue to practise as best they can in difficult circumstances. The workshops demonstrated time and again that

although the spaces in which social workers work are constrained and compromised, by their organizations, by legislation, by more powerful figures than themselves (doctors, lawyers, procurator fiscals, children's panel members, etc.), they have to operate within this, weighing up their options and taking responsibility for what they can. They are in this sense, not powerless; they make choices and act, albeit in a world that is, largely, not of their making. This, of course, mirrors the situation faced by social work clients, who, in a much more profound way, are also constrained by class, gender, 'race', disability, age, etc., and by their personal biographies. A key task of workshops was to unpack shared feelings of powerlessness and seek out the places where change was possible. Sometimes, this was carried out simply by opening a subject for discussion: 'naming' something makes it easier to see the hidden assumptions within it, and so to change orientation, as Certeau & Rendall (1984) argues. Reflecting on a research study (Stanford 2010) that the group read, one social worker said she had cried reading the conclusion. She went on:

I quite often feel like a little voice in the wilderness but I'm not. People have done all this research and are saying the same thing – there are core values here – how I/we relate in the moment and preserve our moral compass in that moment. (12 June 2013)

The accounts of social work organizations were not all negative, however. All the social workers were able to identify managers and/or seniors and colleagues who had supported them on a personal and professional level and who sought to encourage good practice. They also understood the difficulties faced by managers, as one practitioner explains:

I believe that the managers who have the courage to support the development of the human face and reflective space of social work build a culture of confidence in practice. This sits in opposition to those who constrain development based on their own or the institutional fear of "what needs to be done by when" at the coal face. (29 May 2013)

## **Findings about learning**

The critical reflection workshops also helped us to understand better how learning takes place. Many participants observed changes in their own practice and in their lives. They found themselves more willing to read and to ask questions; they felt more energized; they had begun to take up interests again outside work, including writing and, in one case, painting. Someone had started a book group at work; another had spoken to a manager about setting up critical reflection sessions in her team. Two very different pictures emerged beyond this: both tell us something about how learning takes place and how it might be supported better.

One social worker initially told us that although she had enjoyed the workshops thoroughly, and always left the sessions fired up with possibilities and new insight, this quickly 'evaporated' under the pressure of day-to-day institutional policy and procedures. She described this as 'soul destroying'. By the time of the dissemination event at the end of the project, however, her view was more hopeful. She identified that, unlike with practitioner research where there is a concrete product at the end; it is difficult to show what you have learnt. As she said: 'Critical reflection is less tangible – it's more subtle – it's doing whatever

it's doing behind the scenes'. She continued:

Being part of that process gave me a bit of a breathing space, a chance to take stock of my own values as a practitioner and an opportunity to fill up, not as a technician (as someone who follows the rules, though they are important too) but to fill up as a professional. (13 November 2013)

Another practitioner likened his experience at the workshops to the mathematical process of 'fractalling', where patterns and ideas from one setting spin off and are replicated elsewhere, often unconsciously (Mandelbrot 1983). There was a sense that the workshops had changed him and the other participants, including the academic members of staff, and that this process of change could not be undone, even though it was difficult to sustain this with equal energy at all times.

### **Findings about knowledge exchange and culture change**

Two very different views were expressed about this, but both showed the importance of a partnership approach to bringing about culture change. For example, at our post-workshops review, one social worker said:

It was particularly supportive to have the backing of managers at multiple levels when engaging in this project. My experience of this was of a shared sense of ownership that contributes to legitimising participation. When we came together to review and share our experiences there was interest from many valued and valuable colleagues throughout the Children & Families Department and the University.

Another said:

I know that my own manager never mentioned KE once when I was on the course unless I brought it up. . . . No time seemed to have been put aside for the project by anyone other than the "foot soldier" participants. There was very little interest when we tried to feed back. I think what I'm trying to say is that it seemed to me that the participants in the critical reflection workshops seemed, in the main, to take a great deal from them. Also, to be able to see how much of an enhancement critical reflection incorporated into weekly working would be for the confidence of the profession and a way to build it up furthering the Munro report etc. It seems to me that unless the culture of the profession is changed at organisational level then useful "add-ons" like critical reflection will always only be a luxury.

## **DISCUSSION**

The critical reflection workshops were experienced positively by most of those who took part, with only one person expressing the view that she had been disappointed by them. But how could a process that was focused largely on individual learning change organizational culture? How far is our experience of running the critical reflection workshops applicable in another context, and what can be taken forward from this? We will now explore these pressing questions.

The connection between individual learning and organizational change is a complex one. Research on learning tells us that while the nature and management of learning tasks have an impact on the learning process; it is the learner her/himself who actually determines whether or not learning will take place (Cree 2005). The motivation to learn is intrinsic – it is part of the human condition – but a great many other things will affect how and indeed whether learning takes place, including factors within the individual learner and in the learning environment. The same is true for the transfer of learning from the classroom (in our case, the critical reflection workshops) to practice (the world of the workplace). Whether or not the critical reflectors would be able to transfer their learning would depend upon factors in themselves (their motivation, commitment, etc.), in the learning task (the critical reflection process) and in the context (how far it was supportive to change; Cree & Macaulay 2000). What this suggests is that even if our critical reflectors wanted to practise differently, and our workshops were helpful in giving them tools for achieving this, they would fail ultimately unless the environment allowed them scope to put their learning into practice. Unfortunately, although both LAs were keen to take part in the project and supportive of their staff doing so, there was little opportunity for ‘protected time’ for those who took part in the workshops. On the contrary, their caseloads remained at the same level, and the time devoted to the workshops therefore became an added pressure. All of the social workers found themselves working extra hours (unpaid) and doing preparation work for the sessions in their own time. While this might be regarded as a positive culture shift, demonstrating that social work practitioners were taking more responsibility for their own learning, without institutional support, it is difficult to see how this could be sustained in any realistic way. Of course, the critical reflection workshops did not stand alone. They were part of a larger KE project that included inputs for managers and practitioner research training and delivery. The overall success of the project will be seen in the years to come, as practitioners struggle to take forward their learning in a context of continued welfare cuts and resultant pressure.

Turning to the question of replicability, it is always difficult to demonstrate that what works in one setting will inevitably work in another; research suggests that what allows something to ‘work’ in the first place is determined by support factors that may be particular to a specific environment (Cartwright & Hardie 2012; Cartwright 2013). In our context, the support factors were largely down to the pre-existing good relationships generated over many years and in different ways between the university and the social work agencies and between the academic staff members and the practitioners themselves. For example:

- Some of those who took part were previous students of the university
- Some were practice teachers working with the university
- One academic had been a member of one agency’s practice panel over the previous year. (This had emerged out of the earlier KE project and had been set up to develop practice initiatives in children and families’ work.)
- The other academic had undertaken an observation placement in the other agency just before the KE project began

Trusting relationships are essential for KE to be successful, as Smith *et al.* (2013) argue. They also allowed us, to use a popular cliché, to ‘hit the ground running’. We were able to

get into surprisingly deep discussions about practice quickly, without social workers feeling defensive or under attack; at the same time, the academic staff members were able to be honest about their own lack of current practice experience, and yet at the same time be valued for their knowledge of teaching and research. Good relationships are central to learning, just as they are at the heart of social work practice (see Ruch *et al.* 2010). With its focus on looking underneath the surface of situations and exploring the use of self in ‘real-life’ situations, critical reflection in a sense mirrors relational social work practice (Furlong 2013); the relationships between participants and between academics and social workers were a vital part of this process, as social workers shared with each other their individual and collective feelings of anxiety, insecurity and low self-worth, as well as their successes and achievements. One practitioner adds his own thoughts on this:

This resounds with me – I didn’t know many of the practitioners well and felt a sense of anxiety at over-exposing myself and being ashamed of my practice. The fact that I knew the academic facilitators relatively well, having spent time in lectures, tutorials and seminars together, I had a sense of feeling “well held” and I was supported to counter the possibility of shame with my courage and openness. (October 2013)

## CONCLUSION

This project is best understood as part of a developing collaboration – a relationship – between the university and the two agencies involved. In reviewing the critical reflection workshops, we have drawn attention to some of the complexities in KE, not least because different stakeholders wanted different things from the process. While managers may have ‘signed up’ to a project with ‘culture change’ as its goal, the practitioners who attended the workshops were looking for an opportunity to reflect on and review their practice. They were realistic about their agencies and about how difficult it might be for them to change direction in children and families’ social work. For the practitioners, the changes that took place through being part of the KE project happened at a conceptual, rather than an organizational level (Morton *et al.* 2012); they began to think about themselves and their relationship to practice differently, and for most, this meant that the critical reflection workshops were useful, even though they were, in truth, an added pressure in what was already an over-committed work schedule.

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