REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: A CASE FOR INCLUSION FOR FRONTLINE PROFESSIONALS IN IRELAND, MAUREEN O’HARA, INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, SLIGO

ABSTRACT

Social Workers, prison officers, gardaí and social care practitioners who work at the frontline in such demanding professions require specific training with special emphasis placed on their development. Many changes affecting these professionals have occurred in Irish society over the past decade resulting in the need for reflective thinking and practice. This paper explores some of these. The researcher works from an ethical, theoretical, reflective base as a social care practitioner. Based on her experience and perceived views, she argues that there is a need for reflective inquiry and collaboration between all professionals. Moreover, she makes some recommendations for better communication and reflective practice changes in education, training and development, especially for the aforementioned professionals in light of recent reports on child abuse scandals, escalating crime rates and overcrowded prisons.

Keywords: Reflective practice, inquiry, profession, and professionals.

Introduction – social changes in Ireland

There has been an increase in Irish population from 4.240 million people in 2006 to 4.459 million in 2009 (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2010). Crime statistics are on the increase: there were 1,478-recorded offences of Robbery from the person in the 12-month period ending in March 2010. This was an increase of 21.0% on the same period ending in March 2009. The number of Murder-threats increased by over 60% from 53 in Q1 2009 to 85 in Q1 2010 (CSO, 2010).

Furthermore, the Irish prison population has increased, drug abuse, violence and overcrowding is endemic. In 2007 there were 3,695 in prison, which increased by 4% to 3,847 in 2008 and has increased to 4,541 on 25th Jan 2010 (IPS, 2011). The IPS reported that the number of people in Irelands’ prisons is expected to reach a record level of 6,000 by during 2011 (IPS, 2010). In addition, Lally (2010) reported that many of those on temporary release cannot be accommodated in prisons due to lack of space. Coupled with this is the moratorium on recruitment and promotions in the public service (Ahern, 2010). Moreover, the fifth report on Ireland from the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Degrading Treatment (CPT), published (Thursday, 10th Feb 2011), is the most critical yet, and a damning indictment of a prison system that is failing to meet the most basic human rights standards of safe and humane custody (CPT, 2011).

The report identified many human rights issues, including slopping out, overcrowding, escalating violence, patchy provision of health care including mental health care, and above all, the failure to provide safe custody. The bulk of the report is
given over to detailing the appalling human rights issues in Ireland’s prisons. The critical issues of prison healthcare and complaints receive particularly serious censure. Liam Herrick of the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) while commenting on the report said: ‘This report further documents a prison system in crisis, with clear failures in many important aspects of the system – including in relation to healthcare, prisoner protection and investigation of complaints against staff’ (IPRT, 2011).

On another note, in April 2010, there were 5,700 children in care of the HSE in Ireland (Barnardos, 2010). Some of these children may end up in prison. Moon (2010) cited in Crook (Nov. 2010) elicited the staggering number of 576 children who had spent time in prisons in the UK in 2009 but who were found to be innocent. A further 1,216 children, after languishing for weeks or even months in jail, were given a community penalty as their offence was not found to be sufficiently serious as to merit custody. In addition, 60% of the children who are sent to prison on remand do not get a prison sentence. A further social issue of concern at present in Ireland is child abuse.

**Child abuse reports**

In the past five years, three significant reports detailing child abuse have been published: the Ferns report, the Ryan report and the Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation (Murphy report). The Ferns report (2005) was an official Irish government inquiry into the allegations of clerical sexual abuse in the Irish Catholic diocese of Ferns. It identified more than 100 allegations of child sexual abuse made between 1962 and 2002 against twenty-one priests operating under the aegis of the diocese of Ferns. The Report examined the response by the Church authorities in the diocese of Ferns to allegations of child sexual abuse by priests operating under the aegis of the diocese over the forty years to 2002 (Ferns report, 2005).

The Ryan report (2009) details the abuse of children placed in institutional care in Ireland (The Commission to Inquire into child abuse, 2009). Church and state, the two unquestioned pillars of Irish society, criminally neglected the poorest and most vulnerable children and failed in their duty of care (Howard, 2010). The Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation was established to report on the handling by Church and State authorities of a representative sample of allegations and suspicions of child sexual abuse against clerics operating under the aegis of the Archdiocese of Dublin over the period 1975 to 2004 (Dept. Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2009).

Furthermore, there has also been abuse of children by their own families. For example, the Kilkenny incest case 1993 and the Kelly Fitzgerald case 1996 (Quinn, 2008), also the McColgan case in 1998 and the most recent being the Roscommon abuse case in 2010 (Donnellan, Oct.2010). In addition, in 2010 there have been many reports in the Irish press and media regarding the deaths of children in state care
(Baker, 2010; Kelly, 2010 and RTE News, 2010). It can be argued that the aforementioned research and reports depict many people needing specialized care from professionals. However, are professionals adequately trained to deal with this work?

Professional training – at present

Professionals, such as social workers, social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers working with these vulnerable children, citizens and prisoners need adequate ongoing professional training because this work is very stressful on many fronts. The work is intense and can be dangerous, for example, social workers may be confronted with hostility, social care practitioner’s work in close proximity to children, some who are volatile, for 25 hours while on shift; gardaí could be interviewing a person for hours and prison officers work intensely with prisoners (some long term prisoners) while on their shift. Vulnerable people in these situations may be under stress and agitated and it is the professionals on duty who are the first to witness the backlash from these situations.

Therefore, from the researchers experience, in order to work competently in these demanding professions, professionals need to know the key theoretical and professional elements required for the development of professionalized frontline services in the areas of social care, custodial care and policing in Ireland. For the purposes of this paper, the emphasis will be on reflective inquiry and practice. Moreover, it can be argued that as well as continuously employing reflective practice, training should also incorporate a theoretical and ethical base as well as employing a competency based model. Training for the above professions should be highly specialized incorporating theory learned in college, preferably for at least three years and put into practice afterwards in the relevant places of work, for example, in the prisons, in the garda stations and in residential child care centres. However, the following paragraphs show that this has not been happening, across all the aforementioned professions.

Prison officer training in the UK

For example, in the UK, prison officers do not need any qualifications for entry to the prison service and are accepted at 18 years of age. There is an 8 week initial training course, [Prison Officer Entry Level Training (POELT)], which forms the first part of the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ Level 3). The level 3 NVQ is equivalent to A-level (House of Commons Justice Committee report, 2009, p.19). Prison officers who are working directly with juveniles are required to take an additional week’s training course known as the Juvenile Awareness Staff Programme (JASP). It consists of the following: Child protection (1 day); Understanding and working with children and young people in custody (2 days); mental health awareness (½ day); Substance misuse (½ day); Vulnerability Assessment (1 day); Training planning and
resettlement (1 day); managing difficult behaviour (½ day); and, Safeguards (½ day) (House of Commons Justice Committee report, 2009, p.19).

**Recruit Garda Training in Ireland**

In Ireland, training for recruit gardaí is at the Garda College which has been designated an Institute of Higher Education by HETAC. Recruits need to be 18 years of age to be accepted. The 2-year Student/Probationer Education Programme is accredited by HETAC with an award of Bachelor of Arts (Level 7) in Police Studies. It can be argued that like social care practitioners, prison officers and gardaí should be attending college for at least three years before embarking on a career in a prison with people who are very vulnerable and need a lot of help and support. For example, in Norway, recruit prison officers have three years training and the average age of prison officers, both male and female is 45 years of age (Correctional Services of Norway’s Staff Academy, 2008).

**Social Work training in Ireland**

Social work qualifications in Ireland have been granted by an Irish professional body since the establishment of the National Social Work Qualification Board (NSWQB) in 1997. The NSWQB now accredits courses; grants the professional qualification in social work to individuals who complete accredited courses; advises the government and employers on social work qualifications; and carries out research on labour force requirements in relation to social work. The recognised professional social work qualification in Ireland is called the National Qualification in Social Work (NQSW). The NQSW can be gained through a four-year Bachelor degree at Trinity College Dublin and University College Cork or a two-year postgraduate qualification at University College Cork, University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin and University College Galway. Both undergraduate and postgraduate courses offer the same professional qualification.

To be accepted onto the two-year postgraduate course, students have to have successfully completed a social science-based undergraduate degree. The basic social work training curriculum includes the academic disciplines of social policy, sociology, psychology, social research, economics, political science and legal studies, as well as courses on social work knowledge, skills and values. The students must complete at least 1000 hours in professional placements where they are required to demonstrate professional effectiveness in relation to assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation, professional responsibility and use of professional values (Christe, 2005, p.113). The Social Workers registration board has been appointed under the Health and Social Care Professionals Council (HSCPC) and at present is working to establish a register for social workers (National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2011).

**Social care practitioner training in Ireland**

Social care practitioners are required to attend a third level college and have at least a three year degree in Social Studies or Social Science before being accepted for
interview to work in a children’s residential centre. However, most students will have an honours degree in Social Studies in Social Care before applying for a job. It is deemed necessary that social care students have this level of expertise. However, in prisons, for example, St Patrick’s Institution located at Mountjoy prison in Dublin, or in any young offender prison in the UK or elsewhere, officers will be working with young people like the young people, especially boys who are in residential child care centres (Irish Prison’s Chaplin’s Annual report, 2010). Yet as stated above, prison officers in the UK only get one extra week of training which is broken up into half days in preparing them for such highly skilled work.

Social care practitioner training in Northern Ireland, England, Wales & Scotland

However, at present in Ireland, social care practitioners do not have standardization for work and are still waiting for the full implementation of the Social Care Professionals Act 2005. While there are standards used in the centre where the researcher works, there are no formal competencies or codes of practice as are used in Northern Ireland (NI) (Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC, 2010) in the UK (General Social Care Council (GSCC), 2010) and in Scotland (Scottish Social Care Council, (SSCC, 2010)

All members of the above councils are registered. It can be argued that registration should apply to all social care practitioners, gardaí and prison officers in Ireland. Evidence from the SSCC (2010) suggests that for social care practitioners, the register plays an important role in safeguarding people using social services and improving public confidence in social service workers. The register is a public record of workers who have met the criteria for being registered. There are processes in place for removing workers from the register who are found to be unsuitable to work in the social service sector. Other professions such as teachers, nurses and doctors already have registers. The register of social service workers brings social services in line with those professions. This is an important contribution to the wider agenda of raising standards in social services (SSSC, 2010).

On another note, Crook (2009) argues that ‘the complex work demanded of the prison officer is best informed by “life experience” rather than formal qualifications’. However, Crook (2009) also notes that low levels of literacy will impair the work of an otherwise high-performing officer in today’s Prison Service. Prisoners’ release may depend upon officers being able to express themselves clearly in parole reports and risk assessments. Crook (2009) and the Howard League for Penal Reform (HLPR) recommends the introduction of a more stringent literacy test at the sifting stage of the recruitment process.

However, while social work and social studies students are encouraged to reflect on their own personal development as practitioners and are taught courses in professional studies, the researcher argues that reflective practice should start with pre-school children and continue through to second and on to third level education. She posits that it would enhance the education of all students from an early age as it enables them to ‘think’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 78) which would aid and empower them to partake fully in professional reflective inquiry and practice when they commence their professional work. Furthermore, Dewey, (1933, p. 78, cited in Lyons, 2010), while
discussing how the *Challenge of Learning Is learning to Think*, noted that, ‘reflective thinking is and ought to be an aim of education’. In addition, Gould (2004) claims that learning is at the heart of reflective practice stating that in a learning organisation, much learning needs ‘to be ongoing and embedded in the organisational context (ibid, 2004, p. 4 cited in Halton 2010, cited in Lyons 2010, p. 243).

**Reflective practices**

The researcher, based on her own work experience and reviewed research agrees with Lyons (2010, p.20) that especially in the present time of social and economical upheaval in Ireland, there is a critical need for reflective inquiry as the foundation for professionalism amongst professionals. It can be argued that all professionals are experiencing a number of work pressures associated with working in a rapidly changing social and political landscape and in an organisational context in which fiscal concerns appear to dominate as was found by Halton (2007) in her study on Probation Officers in 2007 (Halton, 2010 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 240). For example, in reference to social care practitioners, social workers and the gardai and pertaining to the above reports detailing scandals and abuse, it can be argued that if reflective inquiry involving critical thinking was employed, this abuse would not have occurred. In retrospect, it appears that professionals were viewed traditionally as the ‘overseers’, capable of competently addressing all social ‘ills’.

Conversely, in the US, professions changed from being triumphant in the 1906s to signs of crisis in the 1980s with professional scandals and grave miscalculations of the war in Vietnam, causing Schön (1983, p.11, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 5) to write:

> the professions are in the midst of a crisis of confidence and legitimacy … the long-standing professional claim to a monopoly of knowledge and social control is challenged – first, because they do not live up to the values and norms which they espouse, and, second, because they are ineffective.

This highlighted the need to seriously question professional knowledge and ethical integrity (Lyons 2010, p.5). The researcher argues that this is the case in Ireland now, but, how can professionals be effective?

In being prepared for working at the frontline, professionals need to know how to ‘think well’. For example, Dewey (1933, p. 35, cited in Lyons, 2010, p.10) wrote ‘while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habits of reflecting’. Moreover, reflective inquiry needs to be put in context, with a shift in emphasis from reflective inquiry as a kind of thinking to a kind of knowing in action, to critical reflection for the conscious interrogation of the social, cultural and political contexts of learning (Lyons, 2010, p. 4). These ideas – as a conceptual template – are revealed especially within three major historical strands: Dewey (1933/1998) who identified reflective inquiry as a mode of thinking, of how we think. Schön (1983) studied reflective practice as a kind of knowing through and in the actions of our actual professional practices. Reflective inquiry as critical interrogation of the social and political contexts of learning for the promotion of critical reflective consciousness was instigated by (Freire, 1970; 1997).
Lyons (2010, p. 4) writes that the contemporary work of adult educators in advancing the conception of ‘critical reflection’, was taken up first by Mezirow (1991), Brookfield (2005) and educators especially to promote social justice (Oakes and Lipman 2003; Cochran-Smith 2004; Darling Hammond et al. 2002). The following are examples of how thinking needs to change to improve our understanding of reflective learning:

For example, years ago if a professional trained as a doctor or lawyer, they continued to practice using the information gained in training. However, in today’s age of communication via the Internet especially, there is more accesses to information and ‘new’ knowledge (Argyris and Schön, 1996, p. xxi cited in Halton 2010, p. 245) that keeps changing a pace. Therefore, all professionals and especially, social workers, social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers have an onus to keep abreast of these changes through research and learning which should be encouraged and put in place by their supervisors/management. The following paragraphs show the evidence for this:

As stated by Lyons (2010, p. 6), ‘Jerome Groopman, author and professor at Harvard Medical School, in his 2007 book: How Doctors Think sought to unravel a medical mystery – how doctors figure out the best treatment – or fail to do so. Studying misdiagnoses, Groopman (2007, p. 2) believed that ‘many misdiagnoses were the result of readily identifiable – and often preventable – errors in thinking’ and he concluded that recognising that the way doctors think can affect their success as much as what they know. In addition, Gawande (2007, p.9, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 6) identified three core requirements for success in medicine: ‘diligence, the necessity of giving sufficient attention to detail; the challenge to do it right; and, ingenuity, thinking anew, a matter of character that arises from deliberative, even obsessive reflection’.

Similarly, when discussing teaching and what college students actually learn over their four years of studies, Brint (2008, p.24 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 7) states that ‘to advance what is called the ‘greater professionalization’ of college teaching, some suggest that as part of a tenure file, college professors would be asked to reflect on their teaching practice and to describe the relationships between their practice and their aims for student learning. As already stated, the researcher, agrees with Bok (2006, p. 9, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 7) who claims that ‘critical inquiry and reflective thinking need to be incorporated into undergraduate education.

The need for greater emphasis on reflective inquiry was further highlighted in the assessment of Educating Lawyers, by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Carnegie Report found that ‘students need opportunities to learn about, reflect on and practice the responsibilities of legal professionals By only using the iron-clad case method of legal education, it means the education of lawyers is missing a valued perspective – the way of framing what it is to think like a lawyer, a perspective which is necessary to the reform and continued ethical vitality of the profession, and perceived through reflecting on and engaging in responsibilities of professionals (Sullivan et al. 2007, p. 6 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 7).

Moreover, it can be argued that if social workers, social care practitioners, teachers, doctors, gardai and the clergy in Ireland were engaged in reflective inquiry, the abuses
inflicted on children would have been avoided. In light of, for example, the Ryan report, Ferns report, and Murphy report as well as the latest Roscommon abuse case (2010) professionals need to be acknowledging the wrong that was done and asserting their professional knowledge by reflective inquiry which can reveal important valued benefits at the core of professional education and learning. Reflective inquiry uncovers needed perspectives; identifies critical moral and ethical dimensions of practice, encourages collaborative inquiries deliberating about underlying professional purposes and possibilities which are all valued aspect of professional education that might otherwise be missed if reflective inquiry is lacking (Lyons, 2010, p. 8).

It can be argued that through Dewey’s work, professionals by employing the function of reflective thought can transform a situation ‘in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 100 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 12). Reflective thinking can operate if professionals have the following attitudes which are being:

- Open-minded
- Whole-hearted
- Responsible and
- Direct

Furthermore, professionals practice can be enhanced by being aware of Schön’s (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* in which he states:

We are in need of inquiry into the epistemology of practice. What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowing in academic textbooks, scientific papers and journals (Schön 1983, p. vii cited in Lyons 2010, p. 13).

Schön (1983) was concerned about how professionals know through practice. He knew that practitioners can reveal a kind of capacity to reflect on their knowing in the midst of action. Schön identified this kind of thinking as reflection on knowing in action (Lyons, 2010, p. 15). Schön (1983) believed that this kind of thinking occurred especially in situation of uncertainty, where there is some puzzle, some uncertainty or conflict – similar to Dewey’s concept of the precipitating idea of the puzzle in a situation. Therefore, knowing, learning and theorising takes place while the practitioner is creating whatever resolution to whatever problem. It can be argued that this kind of valued reflected upon knowledge should be written up and submitted as practitioner research by social care practitioners, gardai and recruits.

This could be used to shape and change policies as opposed to policies being made and implemented by people who never worked at the frontline in any capacity as a social care practitioner in a children’s residential child care centre, as a garda or as a prison officer. De Neufville (1984, p. 88 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 15) writes that in the traditional hierarchy, basic research is superior to applied practice. However, he acknowledges that Schön’s argument, suggests that ‘the practitioners task is more complex, requiring theorising and deductive capabilities as well as great imagination and flexibility’. This work is complemented by critical reflection.
The third theorist to discuss reflection was Paulo Freire (1970) in which he influenced the idea of reflection to incorporate the notion of critical reflection based on his studies and life in Brazil where he saw poor people being oppressed due to deprivation of education which culminated in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* published in 1970 (Lyons, 2010, p. 16). He set about changing these conditions and affirmed that ‘human activity consists of action and reflection; it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action’ (Freire 1997, p. 106 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 17).

The researcher avers that as professionals, social workers, social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers could practice the teachings of Freire (1970; 1977) by taking emancipatory action in the form of advocating on behalf of the their clients. To advocate is: ‘to plead for, defend, recommend and support’ (Bateman, 2007, p. 17). Action is needed to address the economic and political stances taken by the government which affect vulnerable people and whose policies are not working only hindering the wellbeing and development of vulnerable people. For example, O’Connor (2009, cited in Share and Lalor, 2009, p. 103) notes that:

- In Ireland, the cost of providing adequate infrastructure and services to the mental health system would be less than €900million (Mental Health Commission 2006), yet the Irish government has stalled on allocating these resources, despite giving tax breaks to the well-off of over €12 billion during the period 1999 to 2005 (Goodbody Economic Consultants 2006; Indecon 2006).
- In the summer 2008, the Health Service Executive (HSE) confirmed it did not have resources to commit to out of hours social work service that could deal with emergencies after 5:00pm and at weekends. This is still the case and lives could be saved and tragedies avoided if there were appropriate after hours services.
- The Irish government continues to refuse to recognise the needs of disability services providers who have established applied behaviour analysis (ABA) projects to provide a more effective treatment for children with autism, yet the government spent €18m defending its position through the courts, using money that could have been provided for the ABA treatment in the first place (ibid, p. 104).

In addition, professionals need to critically reflect on, for example, social and economic factors resulting in un-employment which will further increase crime levels. For example, when comparing Quarter 4 of 2010 (Q4 2010) with Quarter 4 of 2009 *Robbery, Extortion and Hijacking Offences* rose by 36.2% (CS0, 2011).

Furthermore, as it stands, the moratorium on recruitment in the Public services results in less gardaí and prison officers being employed thus putting pressure on those who are there, and who are tasked with addressing escalating addiction, anti-social behaviours, murders and crime statistics. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence is suggesting that social care practitioner posts are now sourced as Internships in service organisations, thus allowing unqualified persons to engage in and work alongside professionals who have educational qualifications and years of experience.
Professional practitioners have an onus to stand up for social justice as they are the voices of the people and their standpoint is their experience of having worked at the frontline where the problems resulting from failed policies are evident. This form of critical reflection, calls into question the power relationships that allow or promote a set of practices (Freire, 1970). The researcher is in agreement with Mezirow (1991) who claims that ‘making meaning through reflection, entails being conscious of living in history’ (Mezirow, et al. 1991, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 18).

Furthermore, this paper posits that professionals can do this by being ethically aware of their own biases thus preventing exploitation of the client(s) and preserving the integrity of the profession. Reflective practice is enhanced by professionals utilizing skills based on values such as trust, compassion and empathy (Thompson, 2005), while valuing the dignity, respect and integrity of the people they work with. All practitioners should uphold their moral integrity in their professional work. As stated by Banks (2010, p. 2170), when the term ‘integrity’ is used in relation to people and actions, it is ‘moral integrity’ that is meant.

For gardai, social workers, social care practitioners and prison officers, this calls for them to continuously reflect on their present state of work and be prepared to make changes for the good of their work and their profession. This approach to integrity as a kind of moral competence or capacity usefully extends its characterisation as a thick and complex virtue and enables professionals to more easily undertake empirical explorations of integrity (Banks, 2010, p. 2177). Once established, moral integrity can be built on through the extension of personal elevation throughout the institution, with the ultimate creation of systems and institutions that are built on a sense of shared integrity (Diessner 2008 cited in Leonard and Kenny, 2009, p. 68).

Now more than ever, it needs to be indicated to practicing professionals about, just how we are defining reflection and what it is we are researching and why: the implication of many definitions - the problem of conducting research, having an agreed-upon procedure: using which methodology? (Lyons, 2010, p. 20).

Furthermore, Lyons (2010) argues that narrative inquiry research may be an especially appropriate method as it attends especially to individuals’ particular contexts, as well as the circumstances of individuals in contexts. Narratives are replete in the works of Dewey, Schön and Freire suggesting almost a natural kind (Lyons, 2010, p.20). Of equal importance and in order to embark on reflection a professional has to be ‘present’ in their work.

This can be difficult for social workers, social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers in times of economic harshness where there are cut backs in staffing and resources. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006, p. 24, cited in Rodgers, 2010, p. 49) have defined ‘presence’ as ‘a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical interactions of the individual and the group with the world and each other, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step’. Having presence is about the quality of the attention that a professional gives to the person they are addressing/caring for as they take in the whole picture as opposed to ticking off the required ‘chores’ on the rota when they are on shift (ibid, 2010, p.55).
The researcher agrees with Lyons (2010) stating the need for professionals to give their views on inquiry through research and reflection. In this way they gain an understanding of knowing, which can help them to take an inquiry stance and to create a culture of reflective inquiry in their places of work (Lyons, 2010, p. 35). Furthermore, social care practitioners, gardaí and prison officers should as part of their daily work make links between research and practice (Lyons, 2010, p. 33). This would give them confidence to ask questions in terms of research and how this can be applied to their practice.

At the researcher’s workplace, there are weekly team meetings and regular professional supervision every six weeks (O’Neill, 2009). This can enlighten professionals to changes that have occurred and opens their mind to new research that they or their colleagues can share or can learn from each other. For professionals, this opens up the debate for more questions in relation to all aspects of their work and training with the focus being at all times on the betterment of the child, citizen and prisoner in their charge/care. This confidence building helps to bridge gaps in information and if necessary highlights ineffective practice in teams; it could improve work practice if it were applied across all agencies that work at the frontline with vulnerable people.

Furthermore, Winter (1999, p. 193 cited in Halton, 2010 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 242) when writing critically about the increasing bureaucratisation of the caring professionals, also maintains that reflective practice offers a way to re-address the routinisation and mechanisation of practice and the increasing demoralisation of the caring and teaching professions:

> The reflective paradigm assembles its theoretical resources in order to defend professional values, creativity, and autonomy in a context where they are generally felt to be under attack from political and economic forces which threatened to transform the professional from an artist into an operative, (1999, 193).

It can also be argued that professional supervision involving effective reflective practice could help to alleviate burnout experienced by professionals working under pressure in the caring professions. For example, O’Brien (2011) while writing about social of social workers, talked to social workers in parts of Dublin who said ‘they were being forced to ignore hundreds of potentially serious child protection concerns due to heavy workloads and under staffing’. Many social workers commented on the constant turnover of staff, leading to inconsistency and a demoralisation of teams (O’Brien, 2011).

From the researcher’s experience, daily reflective practice and inquiry gives professionals time to think about what they are doing in their work and how they can improve on it with help from their colleagues, inter-professional teams, supervisors and managers. Professionals’ work is complex and is constantly changing. Reflective practice among teams and at professional supervision can highlight malpractices of colleagues. Furthermore, reflective practice can update and keep professionals abreast of new laws affecting practice are being implemented and passed and new crime boundaries being set, for example by offenders (Murphy, Dempsey & Halton, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 173). However, all these changes have to be competently addressed, albeit within tight fiscal restraints by gardaí, social care practitioners and prison officers. It is important for professionals to realise that legal education must be an
ethical education, steeped not simply in legal issues, but rather steeped in the issues arising from the actual life experiences of the individuals involved (Lyons, 2010).

Furthermore, professionals are aware that professional activity is being challenged and monitored. This has lead to tension between professionalism and bureaucratisation in agencies and given a new impetus for reflective engagement in professional education. While tools for reflection have been developed and refined over the past 10 years, considerable attention still needs to be invested in constructing clear rubrics for assessments that are compatible with identified practice competencies. This can be improved by building partnerships between educational institutions and practice organisations, which will in-turn, be influential for furthering reflective inquiry and in constructing the future identity of the aforementioned professionals (ibid, 2010, p. 187). To be competent in their practice, professionals need to be open to the knowledge of ‘knowing’.

The knowledge of knowing can be gleaned from an appreciation of learning scaffolds, for example the reflective portfolio and from peers and presentations. The portfolio or learning journal is a useful learning tool in scaffolding and promoting ongoing learning and development throughout a professionals’ career (Lyons, 2010, p. 34). The researcher would further argue that these learning scaffolds give the professional a conscious edge on knowing. David Boud and his colleagues – early exponents of reflective inquiry – ask the question: ‘Why is it that conscious reflection is necessary? Why can it not occur effectively at the unconscious level?’ They also answer their query: ‘it can and it does occur, but these unconscious processes do not allow us to make active and aware decisions about our learning. It is only when we bring our ideas to our consciousness that we can evaluate them and begin to make choices about what we will and will not do’ (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1996, p. 33 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 41).

Therefore, professionals who have a duty of care to vulnerable peoples should always be present and wide awake to ask and answer questions and to make life better for their clients, colleagues and themselves. This can be copper fastened by employing Dewey’s attitudes – The Methods of/for Reflective Inquiry. In How we Think, Dewey discusses reflective thinking and its phases, noting that:

There is an old saying to the effect that it is not enough for a man (sic) to be good, he must be good for something. The something… is capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances what he contributes. What he gets and gives is not external possessions, but a …more intense, disciplined and expanding realisation for meanings (Dewey 1944/1916, p.359 cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 39).

In summary, while recommending reflective practice and inquiry for all professionals most especially for social worker, social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers the researcher argues that it is through professional reflective practice supervision that professionals will be able to forge their identities. This can be accomplished by getting their managers to listen to them - the professionals who are working at the frontline. It can be argued that there is an overarching need for change which incorporates a bottom up approach as opposed to a previously assumed top down
approach. The voices from the workers who do the hands on work needs to be heard if worthy changes are to be made, albeit in times of limited resources.

However, as Halton argues (2010, p. 243), the promotion and sustenance of reflective supervision requires an environment of mutual trust, to facilitate the mutual questioning of practitioners ‘theories in use’. In Halton’s (2007) study of the probation service in Ireland, she found that poor internal systems of communication impeded reflective engagement in the organisation. One probation officer from her survey commented:

The sharing of information, of what’s going on in order areas would help to build support throughout the Service. It would help to build morale and to develop trust. Unfortunately, there is not a sharing of ideas culture in the probation service (Probation Officer, Halton, 2007).

Moreover, Halton (2010, p. 243), emphasises that in his work, Schön (1983) also emphasised the importance of the organisational context to promoting reflective engagement. He asserted that reflective inquiry can not only result in practitioner learning and in change but can also assist in organisational change and transformation. A senior officer made important links between good quality supervision, increased worker morale and improvement in service delivery:

The morale of workers in the Service is very important and needs to be addressed. I believe ongoing staff training and development and the provision of regular, good quality supervision would go a long ways towards addressing the issue of staff morale. The morale of the service is important and the service needs to recognise that when the morale of officers is high the quality of services delivery is at its best (Senior Probation Officer, Halton 2007, cited in Halton 2010, in Lyons 2010, p. 234).

The researcher would further recommend that management should be meeting their staff face to face on a regular basis, rather than the professionals just meeting their supervisor. Staff feel more appreciated if they are given a voice and listened to, all staff need to meet and exchange views about how best to organise and make changes so they can promote a better ethical, theoretical and reflective practice to their clients as well as boosting morale amongst themselves. Social workers, social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers should be claiming their ‘Street –Level Bureaucracy’ a term identified by Lipsky (1980) to describe ‘public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work (ibid, 1980, p.3, cited in Halton, 2010, p. 244).

Given Ireland’s experience of reports on scandals and abuses which have occurred, as well as failed justice policies which have resulted in overcrowded prisons and an escalating crime rate, it can be argued that there needs to be a change in learning and how information is communicated amongst all professionals especially social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers. The researcher recommends good trans-disciplinary team work to encourage reflective engagement coupled with regular inter-professional meetings between professionals in all local communities, for example, involving Social Workers, Social Care Workers, Gardaí, Probation Officers, Psychologist, Psychiatrists, Teachers, Addiction Councillors, Youth Workers and GP’s.
Furthermore, some of the aforementioned professionals may not be fully aware of what each of the other professionals do: what cases they are dealing with; how many cases they have; how they address issues; what issues keep re-occurring; and results and evidence of outcomes, among other things. Yet in many cases, the same young person(s) at the centre of a case could be known to all of the professionals at different times. For example, a probation officer in Halton’s (2007) study noted: ‘In this organisation I feel nobody listens, no one is interested, I do my work alone and in relative isolation from managers and colleagues’. Therefore, as recommended by the researcher, teamwork is of the essence and is further illuminated by Gould and Baldwin (2004 cited in Halton, 2010, p.254), who warn that individual learning alone is not a sufficient condition for organisational learning; they maintain that learning needs to take place across multiple levels in organisations. Communication is of utter importance in teamwork and in organisations.

Argyris and Schön (1996, p. xxi) when discussing communication in organisations, identified ‘double loop’ communication systems within the communication structures of ‘learning organisations’; this ‘double loop’ communication system contrasts with what they termed ‘single loop’ communication systems that are found in more hierarchical type organisations. ‘Double loop’ communication flow, is what the researcher is proposing and it involves an active and responsive engagement between all parties within the communication process (Halton, 2010, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 245). Good leadership and inter-dependency between all parts of organisations is required (Brearley, 1992, cited in Halton 2010, p.246).

It can be argued that ‘organisation’ as a whole can refer to the wide multi-disciplinary team who are involved in social services in the community. Teams can include, social care practitioners, gardaí, social workers, nurses, GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists, youth workers, teachers, probation officers as well as prison officers, volunteers and family members who are involved in the care and welfare of a child/person. Regular meetings involving professionals akin to primary care teams are needed in all communities. In addition, Senge (1990) drew on systems theory to frame his structural analysis of professional human services. In his seminal work ‘Fifth Discipline’, he explains his understanding of the application of systems thinking:

> Systems’ thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes, it is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than ‘static’ snapshots…it is a discipline for seeing the ‘structures’ that underlie complex situations…it offers a language that begins by structuring how we think (1990, p. 66-69 cited in Halton, 2010 in Lyons 2010, p. 246).

From her experience of working with children, the researcher would suggest that the welfare of all children in local areas should be looked at and would agree with McAra (2010) who warns against a policy of targeting ‘at risk’ children at an early age, as this could result in false positives and stigmatisation. Furthermore, by professionals knowing in advance about all children in their area, it would make them more aware of children/people at risk and this would enable care to be provided for them, rather than letting the problems escalate whereby, for example the young person(s) who may have been a homeless drug addict, is placed in care, brought to the attention of the gardaí and probation and may need to go to prison. The regular presence of
community gardaí working with and for the community provides a positive contribution in all areas. Professionals working in tandem and communicating regularly with their colleagues provides a two-fold awareness that can highlight other issues, for example abuses or neglect of children by their own families or by others and/or crime and drug/alcohol abuse by members of the community.

Conclusion

Whether in Ireland or in the UK as expressed by Crook (2009), ‘professional training has to build on existing skills and education; it does not take its place’. Therefore, it is important that resources by the government should be spent on proper training for professionals who work at the frontline. The researchers recommends that changes in education to include modules on reflective practice needs to be initiated by collaboration between the educational institutions and the service providers. Frontline professionals can be active agents in changing epistemologies of practice. Managers of social care practitioners, gardai and prison officers should take heed of the voices of their frontline workers by engaging them in reflective conversations (Healy cited in Halton, 2010, p.22).

Furthermore, management will be aware that working alongside other professions will continue to pose many challenges. The challenge for managers of service organisations’ is to engage in dialogue and mutual sharing with personnel, at all levels, in an effort to redefine their mission and to set about the process of reconfiguring themselves as ‘learning organisations’ if they are to become dynamic, responsive learning organisations, in which their professional workers are engaged in actively constructing meaning in their work, and contributing to the construction of a shared professional identity (Halton, 2010, cited in Lyons, 2010, p. 252).
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