



An exploration of reflective practice in a social care team

PLR0910/013

PRACTITIONER-LED RESEARCH INTEGRATED WORKING

An exploration of reflective practice within a social care team

A Qualitative Review

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March 2010

Childrens Workforce Development Council (CWDC)'s Practitioner-Led Research projects are small scale research projects carried out by practitioners who deliver and receive services in the children's workforce. These reports are based in a range of settings across the workforce and can be used to support local workforce development.

The reports were completed between September 2009 and February 2010 and apply a wide range of research methodologies. They are not intended to be longitudinal research reports but they provide a snapshot of the views and opinions of the groups consulted as part of the studies. As these projects were time limited, the evidence base can be used to inform planning but should not be generalised across the wider population.

These reports reflect the views of the practitioners that undertook the research. The views and opinions of the authors should not be taken as representative of CWDC.

A new UK Government took office on 11 May. As a result the content in this report may not reflect current Government policy.

An exploration of reflective practice within a social care team

Abstract

What are the positive aspects of using the idea of a systemic reflective space within a social care team?

Introduction

This small-scale qualitative research study is an exploration of how a forming multi-disciplinary team within a Local Authority Children's Services department was able to develop a "reflective space".

Methodology

A statutory multi-disciplinary team in Greenwich Children Services set up a fortnightly "reflective space" which allowed individual team members to present a case they were working with and benefit from the reflections of the "systemic reflective team".

The team involved in the research comprised six social workers, one social work student and one educational psychologist. The social workers' narratives are identified using an initial.

Several methods of reflection were used during this process including images, inner talk, toys and role play. The participants of this process were then asked to write a commentary on their experiences. Thematic analysis was used to capture key themes. It is these commentaries which form the findings, and they are presented in four themes. Large sections of participants' narratives are used to describe their experiences. The themes were selected on the basis of level of repetition in the participants account.

Findings

The findings are presented using the following four themes, which emerged from the analysis:

- The value of multiple perspectives.
- The benefits of a systemic reflective space.
- The use of techniques.
- Developing curiosity.

It is concluded that the team have benefited from the experience of the systemic reflecting space. It has resulted in new ways of thinking and learning, that has enabled team members to transform their practice.

Introduction

Social workers are encouraged to consider how their own construction of day-to-day life impacts on the judgements and decisions that they make in their practice. This method of working is often referred to as “reflection”.

However, when social workers are invited to give account of their practice, lived experiences, gut feelings and human ways of knowing are pushed aside for objectivity, certainty and truth/facts. The account that seems most privileged tends to be quantitative and objective in nature. This reflects the background activities: local, political, legislative, and organisational discourses that shape social work assessments and practice. Government targets and local authority timescales appear to be the driver, and overwhelming factor, as to why reflection on action is no longer a part of everyday practice.

Over the last three decades, qualitative research methodologies have grown within psychology, education and health, but this ascent is not visible in social work (White, Fook and Gardner 2008). There appears to be a contradiction, given that social workers are told that reflective practice is the way forward to creative, inspirational, imaginative and hopeful practice.

Aims

“Institution engaging with patients who short-circuit their own thinking and reflecting on their experiences need to establish specific means for developing the capacity to reflect, as a function of the institution” (Hinshelwood, 2001).

This study explores through an appreciative lens the positive benefits afforded when a multi-disciplinary team within a social care setting creates a reflexive, collaborative and relational space to demonstrate:

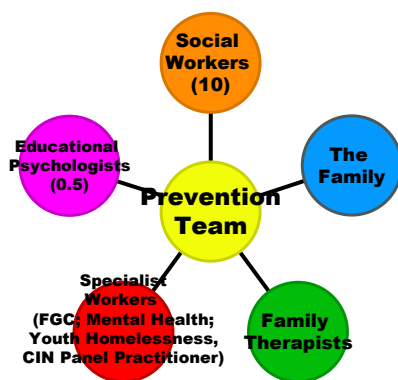
1. how the reflective practice is performed
2. how to offer a reflective framework as a basis for further research and development
3. through case examples, how the reflective practice transcends traditional social work managerial structure and rediscovers practitioners’ talent, ability and competencies (human abilities) as the primary tool to explore their practice

4. how the reflective space enhances new learning
5. how a systemic reflective team approach can generate new ideas and bring forth new ways of working
6. how the team harness new learning through the tools used in the reflective space
7. how new learning, meaning and understanding emerge through the reflective team process
8. how knowledge is generated through reflections.

Context

The setting for the project was a newly evolving “Preventions Team 5-19” which was set up following a departmental reconfiguration. The Preventions Team is located in Children’s Safeguarding and Social Care. The remit of the team is to manage, develop, and deliver integrated, targeted services within a broader Prevention and Early Intervention Framework. The focus is early intervention; i.e. when problems are developing, to prevent the need for more intensive, expensive or intrusive (statutory) intervention, where appropriate. A breakdown of staffing is shown in the diagram below.

Preventions Teams – Targeted Services in Universal Settings



- 2 Multi-Disciplinary Teams
 - 0-4 and 5-19
 - 16 -20 staff in 5-19
- Right Service at Right Time in Right Place
- Remote Working - Based in Schools and Children’s Centres
- Reflective Practice

It was anticipated that this project would build upon learning afforded by practitioner-led research activity last year, into home-based systemic practice and integrated working, which highlighted the value of a reflective space and the opportunity to change established practice to best meet the need of service users and optimise outcomes (Bevan and Jude 2009). One point in the action plan following that piece of research was to develop reflective team processes within the team. It is this process that the research will focus upon.

It is important to highlight the broader socio-political context for this study. Lord Laming's (2009) review of child protection following the death of baby Peter in Haringey noted "*There is concern that the tradition of deliberate, reflective social work practice is being put in danger because of an overemphasis on process and targets, resulting in a loss of confidence amongst social workers. It is vitally important that social work is carried out in a supportive learning environment that actively encourages the continuous development of professional judgement and skills. Regular, high-quality, organised supervision is critical, as are routine opportunities for peer-learning and discussion.*" (Laming 2009:32)

The case of baby Peter also echoes themes which emerged following the ordeal of Victoria Climbié, which showed the danger of maintaining a fixed hypothesis about a family within the assessment process and did not allow for a shift in position. Fook (2002) usefully distinguished between reflective and reflexive practice. Reflective thinking is concerned with identifying a process of working things through, whereas reflexive thinking is concerned with a stance of taking into account as many different perspectives on a situation as possible. Parton and O'Byrne (2002) describe reflexivity as responding to the uniqueness of each individual (cited in Payne 2005). Being able to consider the uniqueness of each individual family is crucial to effective social practice. Ruch (2007) notes that in recent years there has been a growing interest in reflective practice as an approach that acknowledges the complexity and uncertainty inherent in contemporary social work practice (Ruch 2007:659). Reflective practice is an attempt to respond to these challenges.

Literature Review

The research on practitioners' experiences of reflective practice is thin. Our review, which is not exhaustive, focuses upon three different categories of reflective practice: educational, theoretical and organisational.

Educational

The works of Ingrid, Gunnar & Sveinung (1994), show that during the last decade reflection has been the buzzword in teaching, particularly in education and the medical field.

The use of reflection in education and the medical sector is varied, taking the form of:

- the use of portfolios
- learning journals/logs
- storytelling
- reflection on work experiences.

Although reflection is seen as a goal in many educational settings, its use remains problematic.

Theoretical

Oliver (1998), Anderson (1999) and Shotter & Katz (2007) offer a theoretical framework to facilitate a therapeutic reflective space to be used in any context. The reflective frame is rooted in systemic tradition, privileging the idea of conversation between team members. The process is based on team members and presenter taking, in turn, the position of speaker and listener. The reflective space allows for multi-level reflections. What is unique about this process is that the presenter does not have to take up the ideas of the team as he/she is free to do as he/she wishes with the offers made by the team.

Organisational

The use of reflective practice in health and the 'helping' professions has mainly focused on content, process and hypotheses. However, Oliver (1998), does not support this view. She

argues reflection should be multi-level, specific in focus; and learning potentially may be on cultural, relational and individual levels.

On the other hand, Bound, Cressey and Docherty (2006), suggest that reflective practice in the workplace should be less formal. Their approach emphasises collective reflection in, and on, the work being carried out. Heel, Sparrow and Ashford (2006) found that reflective practice, on the whole, was beneficial. Their research concluded that reflective practice should be part of the personal management development 'toolkit'. Vandenberghe and Huberman (2006) question the value of reflective practice. They argue the practice is confusing and the knowledge informing the practice is not grounded in theory. From personal experience, reflection should facilitate both reflection in and on action (Schon, 1995) and offers an abundance of learning from many levels: organisational, relational, professional and the wider context.

Critique

The use and meaning given to the term reflective practice is broad and varied. Our literature review revealed the term could be used to describe an approach, a way of working grounded in action, or a technique to facilitate and transform learning.

Key areas of concern are whether the practice of reflection: facilitates the improvement of knowledge and mastery in professional practice for the individual; helps to generate theory; and results in the individual becoming a more critical practitioner within their professional domain.

The argument about the benefits of reflective practice will be ongoing as long as there continues to be a lack of research in the area, as identified by White, Fook and Gardner (2006). Experience of researching this area has revealed there is a gap in practitioner-led knowledge.

Against this backdrop, our decision to develop a workplace-based reflective space was an attempt to address the gap observed by White et al.

The project aimed to establish a practice that had the relevance and practical application of workplace experience, yet also encourage participants to think more broadly and critically about wider contextual issues.

It is not evident that literature exists which addresses this area from practitioners' experience, offering methods of testing that validate emerging claims from the work undertaken. In addition, the model used in this project does not suffer the dualism (reflection/critical reflection) issue as it embraces both critical and reflective practice.

Our Use of Reflective Practice

Fook (2002:43) suggests that reflective thinking is concerned with identifying a process of working things through, whereas reflexive thinking is concerned with taking into account as many different perspectives on a situation as possible. Reflexive thinking thus stresses the usefulness of developing multiple hypotheses as opposed to developing a fixed, unchanging view which is potentially dangerous, as in the case of baby Peter. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) describe reflexivity as responding to the uniqueness of each individual. (Payne 2005:35).

When we refer to the idea of reflective practice we mean a process that allows the practitioners to reflect on their own knowledge, ideas, experience and values that impact on their action. We view reflection as a process of taking a moment to stand back and think about the meaning given to a situation or a set of circumstances in a particular time and place; in relation to self, others and the wider context. The systemic approach used offers a structure that enables multiple ideas from a variety of sources to be made available.

Our reflective space is born from ideas of Schon (1995) and Anderson (1987). The theoretical frame that embodies the structure is rooted within a systemic constellation of ideas.

The framework offers eloquence, humility and dignity in the act of reflecting. Anderson's model creates a unique space, enabling meaning to emerge in abundance. Exploration and curiosity have a central space in the process. The different types of talking performed by the presenter and the reflecting team members allows for a sense of dignity to be created in the process.

Schon critical reflection

The writings of Donald Schon (1995) have fundamentally changed the way modern schools educate their students.

Schon is interested in tacit and explicit knowledge that he argues is as important as objectively scientific based knowledge. Schon's approach is unique in that it enables the practitioner to generate knowledge by reflecting on their experience.

In Schon's work he defines what methods a professional must take to reach a level where reflective practice skill becomes a habit, and artistry results.

The model

Systemic Reflective Space (SRS) focuses on developing professional practice that requires practitioners to use their skills, competence and abilities in a shared communal/collective way, thus inviting collaborative and reflective practice.

SRS provides an alternative view (or views) on aspects of the practitioner's work and offers an opportunity for the practitioner to explore a variety of options in their practice, facilitate learning and help transform practice. Reflective practice space focuses on strength and diversity of repertoires.

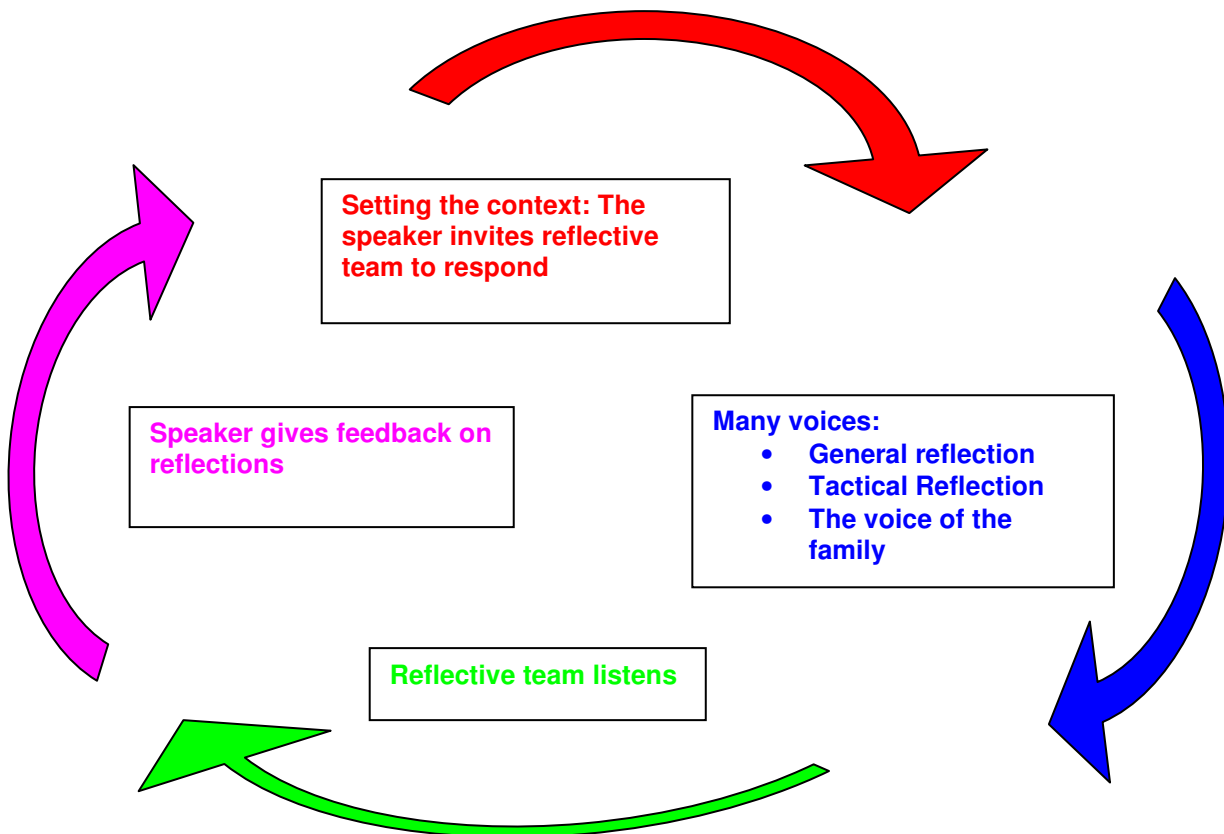
Ground rules : Expectations of reflecting team members

The ground rules refer to the position reflecting team members are encouraged to take to facilitate the process. The principles are taken from Tom Anderson's (1987) work on the reflecting team.

- Reflect presenter's pace/style.
- Connect comments to material that has been presented.
- Be mindful of negative feedback.
- Talk in a way that enables the presenter to listen.
- Listen in a way that enables the presenter to speak/give feedback.
- Ideas should be presented tentatively.
- The reflecting team conversation should not mirror what the presenter has discussed but offer something quite different to enable sufficient difference to emerge from the process. Too many same/similar ideas is not helpful.

- Reflecting team model invites participants to offer as many explanations for a situation as is possible.
- The reflecting team process is about creating passion for possibilities that will lead to HOPE and CHANGE.

The model: Systemic reflective practice



Methodology

The research process took on the following structure:

- We held four team meetings to discuss how the research project would evolve.
- During the meetings we identified the approach, literature, frequency, time and location for the team to meet.
- We had an initial meeting with our mentor and several meetings with team managers to agree the process.
- We met regularly to give the participants feedback.

The team members involved included 6 social workers, 1 social work student and 1 educational psychologist.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the narratives of the participants. It can be a very useful method for novice researchers and has the potential to be straightforward, which was crucial to us within our busy work setting. Thematic analysis is a rarely acknowledged, yet it is a widely used qualitative analytic method within psychology. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is useful in locating and searching for themes or patterns.

Findings

The findings are presented using the following four themes, which emerged from our analysis:

- The value of multiple perspectives.
- The benefits of a systemic reflective space.
- The use of techniques.
- Developing curiosity.

Participants' narrative on systemic reflective space

One response to the idea from the literature review was that reflective type research was losing sight of an understanding of practitioners' experience as a useful tool for qualitative research and social knowledge.

We found that our approach offered team members a model of knowledge which places responsibility for learning on the team's involvement. This model is consistent with the values and ideas that informed our framework.

In the examples offered we use large clusters of members' narratives, as storytelling is the primary form by which individuals, communities, families and groups make experiences meaningful. The narratives used are examples of practice written in the first person.

Developing Curiosity

The theme of curiosity emerged strongly during the project; an example of this is given by social worker A below.

“The reflective space has helped me to stay open and approach my work and families with more curiosity. I had felt quite stuck with some families and also felt work was more routine and I was not enjoying what I was doing as much as I would have wanted to.

“I really appreciate the possibilities the reflective space has offered. It has been helpful in giving clarity and direction for my cases, as well as transferring ideas and reflections that arose on other cases”.

“The reflective space practice was a new experience in my practice and my initial responses were those of anxiety, fear of criticism, fear of invasion into my practice and I wondered whether this was not a repeat of my supervision sessions. This could have been compounded by my being a new member of the team. However the concept, aims and objectives became clearer when this was clearly explained to me by colleagues who are co-ordinating the programme”.

“A discussion on theories and values in the initial stages of the reflective space helped clarify issues and provided a foundation on which to work”.

“The systemic reflective space enabled me to re-examine the power dynamics and to reflect on how and to what extent social workers and other professionals exercise power within family settings and how this can impact on relationships”.

The benefits of systemic reflective space

We found that team members consistently remarked on the power and effectiveness of using a variety of methods and resources to offer and generate alternative perspectives. An example of this is given by social worker B.

“What has been really positive about the reflective space has been the development of multiple ways of reflecting, using role play or inner talk, using a reflecting team and using toys and visual

aids. I have found that the different approaches offered different styles of reflections and really supported an idea of creatively stimulating the way we think about our cases to offer a more complex and rich version of the work we are doing.

I have particularly found the visual aspects, which seem to tune in more with themes and emotions and workers' responses, to be really helpful as it develops another layer of reflection and seems to reconnect workers with their personal responses to families and families' responses to their situations.

I feel that this has been really useful in helping me to remain mindful that families' problems are multifaceted and engage both workers and family members in emotional responses which we do not always have the time and space to reflect on. I have found that the reflective forum together with other reflective practice increases my own capacity to self-reflect on cases and promotes an ethos of reflection that is not reserved for that space but continued throughout my work".

Social worker C noted that the use of images evoked a humanitarian response to practice (see appendices)

"The use of images was extremely useful and has become a valuable resource in the reflective space. It made me feel more prepared and able to transfer the knowledge gained to the direct work with families. Often it is difficult to 'only talk about an issue' but using images generates ideas and helps family members talk to each other and share feelings."

Social worker D talked about the emergence of hope in the reflective space and its impact on her practice. *"The reflective practice experience allowed me to give hope in a hopeless situation.....the entire experience evoked a philosophical way of thinking about my work and our service users.*

Systemic reflective space through a student lens

A student social worker commented on the usefulness of the reflective space.

"Due to the fact that I have already had experience on my course of participating in a reflective space, I thought that this was a really progressive step for this team. Many of my colleagues at

university do not have the opportunity to participate in this type of activity within their placement. What I truly value about this time is that this activity actually validates and raises the profile of peer learning. Also it provides a safe place to discuss concerns, doubts and difficulties that a practitioner may encounter with regard to a case outside of supervisory framework.

“I think that having a structure for the reflecting team process is also useful, it enables the practitioners to engage in critical thinking and to formulate hypotheses, which then can be tested out by the worker in his/her future work with the family.”

“I found the experience of the reflective space highly supportive in terms of helping me to look again at my practice. It provides a forum for learning and collaborative practice. I think that this essential due to the fact that most of the work that social workers do is done as a lone worker. The chance to question, to look at the assumptions, ideas that inform ways of working is critical to ensuring that my practice is safe and that it empowers those I engage with.”

The use of techniques

Below, an educational psychologist gives feedback on the use of different techniques used in the reflecting team approach.

“In a session during which I presented a case to the group three participants fed back in the voice of a professional and the remaining two used pictures and objects. I found this very useful – from the first group I listened to ideas about how the family could be helped to move forward, and where the young person may be coming from, and what his needs might be. And from the second group I was shown a pictorial portrayal of possible feelings of family members. Used in conjunction I gained a holistic summary of the family and issues affecting them. I went away from the experience with a refreshed way of helping this family.”

“Often in the work we do I feel that bureaucracy takes up much of social worker’s time. (Although being in the current team compared to where I worked before has already been different.) It has been especially helpful using different techniques of reflecting back. I have

found the family reflection to be very significant in giving the child a voice” Comments made by social worker E.

The value of multiple perspectives

Several comments were taken from different social workers about the value of the reflecting team generating multiple hypotheses.

“I value the reflective team process as it provides an opportunity to develop a myriad of ideas and hypotheses, particularly with cases that I feel ‘stuck’ with. It is also positive to engage creatively with other team members and be one step removed from direct practice in order to reflect and develop new ideas. I have also found it to be really valuable in getting to know other members of the team and their strengths and knowledge and perspectives” Social worker G

“I think that having a structure for the reflecting team process enables the practitioners to engage in critical thinking and to formulate hypotheses which can then be tested out by the worker in his/her future work with the family... The chance to question, to look at the assumptions, ideas that inform ways of working is critical to ensuring that my practice is safe and that it empowers those I engage with.” Social worker A

One worker commented directly using a case example she had presented:

“In considering the experience of listening to these three responses I found them to be rich and illuminating and felt they each added a further dimension to my own thinking around the case. I think that having someone else actually articulate ideas that had been bubbling away at the edge of my own thinking enabled these slightly obscured areas to be brought to the forefront of my own mind which meant that I had to engage with them. It was not that I hadn’t wanted to engage with them previously but that the everyday pragmatics of case management is exhausting in itself.

“Clearly as a psychologist I had given time for reflection on the management of the case. Yet nothing is as galvanising as ‘hearing’ perspectives of those not caught up with the daily grind of the actual case management: those who can maybe see the wood for the trees as they are not involved in managing the trees directly!” Social worker C

"I find that role play allows me to speak from the person's point of view rather than through that of a professional involved and the great thing about reflective practice in our sense is that we are using a number of methods of feedback. Another useful feedback method is using pictures and 'objects' in order to summarise where the family is and what the issues are facing the family and/or individual. I have not undertaken this method yet and I have been moved by the power of this tool - the pictures chosen always conjure up exactly the feelings brought up in the case but are obviously subjective (as is this practice) to those choosing them" Social worker E

Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of reflection by members of a multi-disciplinary team within a social care context.

Team reflection was not an activity that had been developed formally in the Preventions Team, so team members were not familiar with the idea of dialogical reflection in practice. However, in a short space of time and with lots of enthusiasm we were able to use the method developed to manage the task.

Our model, rooted in Anderson's approach (1987), does not depend on a particular level of training but on members' ability to connect, in a way that enables the presenter to speak and the reflecting team to listen.

We would conclude that the team have benefited from the experience of the systemic reflecting space, which has resulted in new ways of thinking and learning that have enabled team members to transform their practice.

The project has helped us to explain the procedures that emerged from the team members' energy and enthusiasm. The benefits of using role play, visual aids, soft play and toys not previously used in reflecting team format has been hugely successful.

The use of four different methods of reflecting demonstrated how multiple perspectives can facilitate and generate new ways of working and bring forth new meaning to a situation. The idea of the presenter taking from the reflections what they found helpful has been experienced as liberating. In addition the freedom of the reflecting team to respond in ways that fit each

individual member's unique ways of responding to what they have heard from the presenter has encouraged creativity and imaginative practice.

We found it was possible to create an abundance of alternative perspectives that have been challenging and have required team members to take risks in relation to different ideas, but the end results have generated new knowledge, skills and confidence in practice.

The model formulated by Tom Anderson (1987) and adapted to fit our unique ways of working has provided a conceptual framework that had brought practical clarity to our practice.

The approach developed has room for improvement. However, to enable our practice to develop we will require support within the organisation. The support would need to take the form of a formal structure.

Social workers are often overloaded with work and consequently managerial support is needed to protect the reflective space to ensure team members can participate fully.

This is a pilot study that we hope will be offered to other teams within children's services. Financial support is also required to enable members to have access to a variety of resources to facilitate their learning and understanding of systemic reflective practice.

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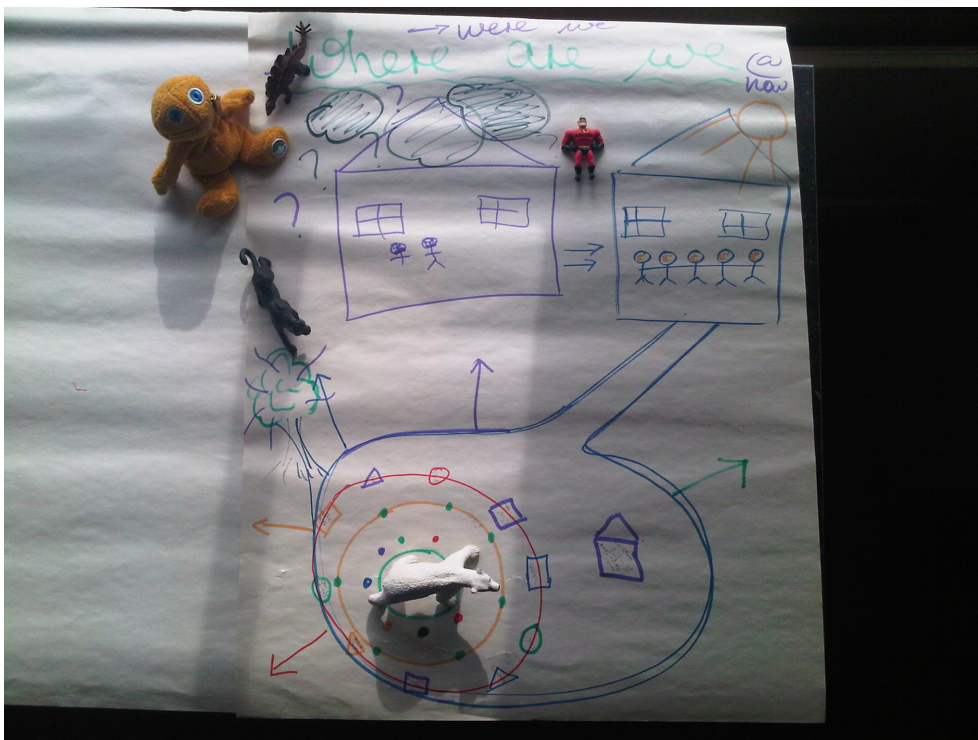
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Appendix

Examples of reflective tools used in our systemic reflective space.



The modality of sculpt board used on a team case.



Example's of sculpt boards used within team discussions.



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