

Critical reflection



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Critical Reflection??? All efforts at self-transformation challenge us to engage in on-going, critical self-examination and reflection about practice, and about how we live in the world. This individual commitment, when coupled with engagement in collective discussion, provides a space for critical feedback which strengthens our efforts to change and make ourselves anew.

??? ??” bell hooksCritical reflection from the position of academics and educators may be viewed differently from the position of child protection field workers. What looks ??? possible??™ and ??? positive??™ from an academic perspective may feel considerably different for those who are ??? in the trenches??™. Critical reflection leads to increased awareness of the tension between personal and professional integrity and ethics, and the tasks one is meant to undertake in the course of one??™s work. Self-reflection, self-location and critical reflection are unquestionably necessary skills for child protection as the need to remain conscious is integral to anti-oppressive and emancipatory work with others. Whether such frameworks are the purveyance of social work, or social work alone, is not the subject of this post. However social work education unquestionably supports the development and integration of such frameworks into practice.

Whilst the tension of balancing safety with the benefits of critical reflection is certainly acknowledged in the literature, for instance in *Practicing Critical Reflection: A Resource Handbook* by Jan Fook and Fiona Gardener, the academic discourse appears unable to encompass a practical solution to the challenges of working within hostile environments. Risk appears minimized or marginalized as is the very real personal and professional danger of undertaking critical reflection in environments, which are not only not

organized to support critical reflection, but overtly work to discourage, undermine and punish it. Sadly many professionals, who work within statutory child protection, identify their work environment as hostile, and unfriendly to critical reflection. Those professionals who acknowledge these challenges are frequently deemed ??? pessimistic??™, ??? obstructive??™ and ??? negative??™, when their lived experiences would be better used to fuel further critical reflection about systemic barriers. In the words of Jan Fook and Fiona Gardener, critical reflection ??? exposes choices and supports a sense of agency??™. Could it be because child protection workers do undertake critical reflection, that the field has seen a mass exodus of well-educated and trained professionals from the sector Retention difficulties have become notorious in tertiary child protection, but are now mirrored in community services as they too become increasingly risk averse and proscriptive. It is not enough to be critically aware, without some means to resolve arising tensions. Encouraging critical reflection in hostile environments may well lead to feelings of frustration, anger, exhaustion, depression and burnout.

Undertaking critical reflection in isolation does not mitigate these risks or subsequent feelings. Ultimately those who critically reflect are likely to leave the child protection playing field altogether or find themselves becoming unconscious and ??? reflection resistant??™ in an effort to manage the unmanageable tension of compromising personal and professional ethics in the course of routine employment. Critical learning is missing.

The professional exodus of social workers from child protection should be interpreted as a red flag. Child protection work has become untenable; that

is, it has become incredibly difficult to practice in an ethical, anti-oppressive and emancipatory way, which is child and family focused. Professionals are criticized for their failure to persist in hostile climates rather than celebrated for the professional and personal integrity of choosing to leave. In the wake of recruitment and retention difficulties the sector questions education and training.

Does child protection need to be undertaken in a different manner, by different professions with different skill sets Are we witnessing the end of critical reflection and anti-oppressive frameworks Is there a place for social work in child protection If a child protection workforce evolves that is devoid of practice frameworks, which emphasize human rights and social justice; critical reflection and self-located practice, it will truly become a system of social control. Child protection workers will become little more than social police officers, enforcing socio-politically determined norms. This is not only an issue for social workers and other child protection professionals but even more so, has the gravest of implications for vulnerable children and their families. We must have a critically reflective work force, if child protection is to be more than an ideal. In order to have a critically reflective work force, we must have organizations and practice systems which pragmatically encourage and support critical reflection.

This critical reflection cannot be an intellectual exercise but must also lead to improved practice and better outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. Perhaps when critical reflection becomes a systemically supported practice, social workers and other skilled child protection professionals will

make their way back into this incredibly challenging and complex area of practice