

Reflective Practice



## Reflective Practice and Participant Involvement in Research

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## Reflective Practice and Participant Involvement in Research

### Abstract

This article discusses the relationships between reflective practice and research for professionals who are research participants. It offers an analysis of the opportunities for reflective practice created for participants through their involvement in research. Three examples of research into professional's perspectives on practice with children in Chile, Malta and Cyprus are presented and analysed. The analysis of the three examples shows the role research can have in creating particular kinds of spaces and relationships that facilitate reflection and how it can introduce dimensions that are normally excluded from critical reflection within a profession. The examples show this as involving: reflection, insight and action; meaning making and empowerment and the interactions between macro, meso and micro perspectives.

Keywords: research; reflective practice; research participant experience; reflective practice with children; reflective practitioner

## Introduction

This article aims to contribute to our understanding of the relationships between reflective practice and research. It reflects the interests of researchers, based in the same University Department, involved in enquiry into different contexts of work with children. The three projects featured had no formal connection, but the article has emerged from dialogue about the impact on practitioners of being involved as research participants. It offers an analysis of the opportunities for reflective practice created for them through their involvement in research. Our approach reflects De Laval's concept of dialogue as the 'mutual exchange of experience, ideas and opinions between two or more parties' (2006, 5). We have reviewed the data from our participants and our intention is to offer material to analyse both the specific experiences of participants in the three individual projects and commonalities across the projects in terms of the relationships between being involved in research and reflective practice.

An analysis of literature will argue that the relationship between reflective practice and research often focuses upon the role of research from the perspective of its effects on the *researcher* in training or professional development contexts. Our article responds to Pedlar et al.'s comment on a gap in the literature concerning the nature of how research can itself, for *research participants*, facilitate, 'stimulate and support critically reflective practice' (2014, 22). The article offers a context for each research project, extracts of data and analysis of the impact of the involvement in the enquiry for the professionals involved as participants. This is followed by discussion across the three examples about the relationships between research involvement and reflective practice.

## Research and reflective practice

The approach in literature often reflects interplay between the values of research and the particular aspects of learning necessary for the development of the ‘reflective practitioner’ (Doncaster, 2018; Emslie, 2009; Hobbs, 2007; Seban, 2009; Thomson and Pascal, 2012). Doncaster (2018, 548), for example, explores the role of research in developing the ‘sports scientist’ as reflective practitioner and Emslie examines the impact of student youth workers’ conducting research during industry-based placement on their professional development and learning (2009, 424). The relationship within the literature here is one whereby the act of research is articulated and theorised in relation to the potentials of the conduct of research as benefitting the researcher. This is connected to the development in the researcher of particular capacities, enhanced qualities or increased knowledge connected to reflective practice. Such facets are identified by D’Cruz et al. (2007, 2) in their connection of ‘critically-reflective practice’ to professionals being reflexive to help foreground the connections between professional knowledge and power in ‘situated practice’. In their review of literature they conclude that the ‘theoretical perspective informing many of these critiques is social constructionism.... that offers justification for re-introducing professional discretion and autonomy, on the grounds that all social practices including professional practice, involve people making meaning through social processes’ (2007, 2). This can involve reflection on a combination of beliefs, attitudes, experiences and training (Jones, 2009; Robb and Thomson, 2010). Appleby and Pilkington (2014), Mann et al. (2009) and Robb and Thomson (2010) situate such reflection as addressing the forces that operate on macro, meso and micro levels: between, for example, the micro level of day to day work with children and the macro level of national and international laws,

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3 policies and guidelines and cultural attitudes. D’Cruz et al. (2007) emphasise meaning  
4 making as a process core to critical reflection and as key to development and learning:  
5 on policy and attitudes; the structures at work in practice and the appraisal of actions.  
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8 Seban, for example, reflects such a perspective, referring to a tradition of literature on  
9 reflective practice, research and learning from research. She draws on Harland and  
10 Myhill (1997) and Francis (1995) on reflective journals:  
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17 To facilitate reflection among novice teachers, different approaches and  
18 activities were used, such as action research projects, case and ethnographic  
19 studies, supervised field experiences and structured curriculum tasks. During  
20 these strategies, writing tasks, most frequently journal writing including  
21 logbooks, personal, reflective response and dialogue journals, were employed, to  
22 foster and assess students’ level of reflection (2009, 670)  
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30 In this strand of engagement with research, the emphasis is upon the impact the design,  
31 implementation and analysis of research can have on the researcher as ‘knowledgeable  
32 doer’ (Thomson and Pascal, 2012, 313) and on their development of insight into how  
33 they factor themselves into the ‘situations’ of practice’ (Fook and Askeland 2006, 45).  
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40 Whilst such authors often draw on research to illustrate reflective practice and  
41 the impact of the act of research on the researcher (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014;  
42 d’Cruz et al., 2007), Pedlar et al. comment on a gap in the literature concerning the  
43 nature of how research can itself, *as a process for participants*, facilitate, ‘stimulate and  
44 support critically reflective practice’ (2014, 22). This article addresses this gap by  
45 examining the impact of being involved in research on professionals who are  
46 participants.  
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## Research Examples

The following three examples involved research into professionals' perspectives on their work with children. The intention is to illustrate the value of looking across different contexts in understanding participant experiences of their involvement in research and reflective practice. Our approach to exploring three examples of research connects to our review of the literature which positions reflective practice as *a reflexive act*, enabling the professional to develop *insight* into the nature and impact of their identity and work with children (Robb and Thomson, 2010). It also reflects the theoretical framework referred to by d'Cruz et al. (2007) in understanding such reflection as looking at the social construction of *meaning* within work, connected to a commitment to professional *autonomy and empowerment*. We will also draw on the framework of the relationships between *macro, meso* and *micro perspectives* as enabling insight into the impact of being involved as a research participant and the nature of reflective practice.

All research was given ethical approval by the University's Faculty Ethics Committee and consent to take part and to have anonymised data shared was obtained from participants. All names used are pseudonyms. The context and methodology for each example is followed by the presentation and analysis of data and discussion across the three examples.

### Example 1 Early years professionalism and reflective practice

#### *Context*

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3 The first example of research concerns the construction of early years  
4 practitioners' professional identities in Chile. Interviews and focus groups were  
5 conducted with thirty eight early years educators and thirteen early childhood head-  
6 teachers - all holding a bachelor's degree in early years education. The research  
7 involved practitioners in semi-structured interviews that included the exploration of  
8 macro/meso/micro perspectives and the dynamics of Early Childhood Education and  
9 Care (ECEC) that impacted on their practice and in the construction of their  
10 professional identities. The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. The  
11 selection of data focuses primarily on practitioner reflection in relation to the theme  
12 concerning the interaction between the micro level of their work and experience as  
13 individual professionals and the macro level, including neoliberal discourse trends that  
14 have driven ECEC policies at national and international levels, as well as the wider  
15 cultural beliefs related to practitioners' work with young children (Ball, 2017; Moss,  
16 2014). It also explores how macro level policies deeply grounded in neoliberal  
17 discourses narrow the possibility for professionals' critical reflection, creating a  
18 reduction of autonomy and a standardisation of early years practice that repositions  
19 them as technicians.  
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43 Several authors have argued that, internationally, early childhood education has  
44 been strongly dominated by a neoliberal discourse that articulates education with the  
45 needs of the market (Ball, 2017; Moss, 2014; Sachs 2001). ECEC in numerous  
46 countries has been increasingly shifting into the logics of an educational market, and  
47 practitioners and children are being understood as resources to meet the demands of the  
48 economy: 'recasting everyone as economic actors, competitive entrepreneurs and (...)  
49 making the maximisation of returns the central criterion for deciding how to relate and  
50 behave' (Moss, 2014, 67). Neoliberal policies are sustained by a managerial view of  
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3 professionalism that emphasises the need of pursuing 'efficiency'. In this view, values  
4 of managerialism are seen as universal and inherently good, with 'efficient  
5 management' considered the best strategy to solve problems (Sachs, 2001). The  
6 following extracts from the research data presents an analysis of the critical reflections  
7 of Chilean practitioners within this cultural and political context.  
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### 10 11 12 13 14 15 ***Research data***

#### 16 17 18 *Meaning making and understanding*

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20 In the research, all participants highlighted the lesson plan as being  
21 perceived as the key 'instrument' of the professional and as involving constant  
22 surveillance of their practice.  
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27 'Lesson plans are seen as central for children's development, but it is  
28 unconceivable for us to plan a year ahead as most nurseries do, because all  
29 children are different and to work professionally you need to get to know them'  
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35 *(Educator, private nursery)*

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38 'It is really easy to fill in forms about children's learning outcomes. It's a lot of  
39 paper work, but is relatively easy to show evidence of that. What is really hard is  
40 to do the job well aware of your responsibility, profoundly concerned with  
41 children's actual learning... but they don't care about that' *(Educator, state*  
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47 *preschool)*

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49 The quotes above illustrate the nature of the reflection they are engaged in through the  
50 space and relationship created by the research, as they create meaning and  
51 understanding of their role and interactions with children. They reveal a theme common  
52 within the data: a tension between their *own* views of childhood and early years  
53 provision within a particular context, and the understandings of children and the role of  
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3 early years practitioners at the *macro level*, for example of policy. Practitioner  
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5 participants engaged in reflection about how children, themselves as practitioners and  
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7 the relationships they are able to form, are shaped and constructed by policies, history  
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9 and culture (Jones, 2009, 23). For instance, in these quotes they reflected on the  
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11 tensions they experience. On the one hand is a child-centred approach that positions  
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13 them as mediators of each child's learning and thus able to adapt their practice to  
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15 provide the best learning environment for each child. On the other hand, policy  
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17 requirements concerning areas such as the frequency and detail of the lesson plan seek  
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19 to avoid 'improvisation', as it is considered an unprofessional, unprepared attitude. This  
20  
21 impacts on the increasing workload of ECEC staff and importantly undermines the  
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23 possibility of reflective practice, and their professional autonomy to discern based not  
24  
25 only on technical knowledge, but also on their knowledge of particular children, and  
26  
27 their relations with their families and contexts.  
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34 A common theme within the reflections within the research concerned how  
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36 macro level policies affected participants' practice in ways that were detrimental to their  
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38 relationships with children and to their understanding and ownership of their own  
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40 professional role. Practitioners comply with the neoliberal performativity and define and  
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42 compare themselves according not only to the pedagogical intentions of the activities  
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44 they report in their lesson plans, but also importantly according to the frequency and  
45  
46 child-centeredness of their schedules as proxies of their commitment and vocation. This  
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48 has reduced the possibility of reflective practice and undermined their working  
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50 conditions and social status as the demands are contradictory: between an emphasis on  
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52 specialised technical knowledge and the caring and nurturing dimensions of ECEC  
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54 considered as unprofessional.  
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3 *Mariela*: ‘Well... I mean, (ECEC) today is a process of initiation to the  
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5 school... the pressure is such that (ECEC) is almost part of primary school. It’s  
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7 much more schoolified than before. You see it in the emphasis, in the day-to-day  
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9 actions, our working practice has changed, the way you are in the classroom has  
10  
11 changed [...] ... before we used to work more through art and played more.  
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13 Today Spanish is the only thing that matters. Spanish and Maths [...] these are  
14  
15 requirements from the Ministry [...] so now we are mostly focusing on that, and  
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17 our time to work on other things is shortened and disappearing. So it appears we  
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19 are improving in one thing but failing in others’ (*Educator, state school*)  
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25 This is an illustrative example of the research enabling participants to actively explore how  
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27 the rapid shifts in national and school policies have changed the purpose of ECEC, but also  
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29 how it has impacted on their practice and their relations with children. Through the  
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31 interview Mariela explores the two juxtaposed narratives about the change in ECEC, and  
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33 starts to articulate how policy requirements contradict her valuing of the child-centred  
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35 perspective on ECEC and that this contradiction is embodied in their practices and  
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37 relationships as a consequence of ‘pressure’ from the ‘Ministry’.  
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#### 41 42 *Spaces, opportunities and relationships*

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45 The research was considered by participants as a rare space that provided the opportunity  
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47 and relationship –either with the researcher or with colleagues- to critically articulate and  
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49 explore their beliefs, attitudes and values against those of the neoliberal professional culture  
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51 (Mann et al., 2007):  
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55 ‘I appreciate this conversation. We normally don’t have enough time to see how we  
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57 are doing or how much efforts we are putting on this. These questions help you to  
58  
59 re-think our roles and practice’. (*Educator, state nursery*)  
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3 The nature of their reflection is illustrated as involving them considering how their beliefs,  
4 attitudes and values about childhood and their professional role working with children were  
5 interrelated and closely driven by the forces operating at macro and meso level through the  
6 national and school policies. Reflecting on the effects of top down policies that standardise  
7 what children are expected to know and able to do, as well as the ways in which  
8 practitioners should work, allowed participants to re-connect with a commitment to  
9 professional autonomy and empowerment (d’Cruz et al., 2007). As practitioners engaged in  
10 reflecting about their practices they also become aware of the impact of the macro level-  
11 policy development and neoliberal culture- in shaping their behaviours, beliefs and  
12 relationships often trapping them in an undermined and precarious occupation.  
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27 As noted within the data extracts, the rapidly changing regulations to ‘improve’  
28 early years professional practice has undermined the possibility for practitioners to reflect  
29 about the assumptions, beliefs and values that are underlying in these managerial discourses.  
30 Therefore, this may hinder the possibility for professional development (Robb and  
31 Thomson, 2001).  
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40 This research provided a space for participants to think critically about their own  
41 practice connecting their emotional commitment, their engagement with content knowledge  
42 and their knowledge developed from their experience with the local community. Involving  
43 practitioners in this type of research, and sharing their critical reflections offers an  
44 opportunity to deepen the insight, share awareness and benefit other professionals and  
45 children to be active participants of what it means to work in the early childhood field.  
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## 54 **Example 2 Pupils reporting bullying: An example of reflection on practice**

### 55 **involving five Cypriot professionals**

#### 56 *Context*

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3 The research was conducted in Cyprus, exploring interdisciplinary  
4 perspectives on bullying prevention. Five professionals were selected through  
5 purposeful sampling in order to reflect on their practice together over a number of  
6 months. Those involved were a teacher (T), an educational psychologist (EP), a  
7 social worker (SW), a theatre practitioner (TP) and a music therapist (MT), all  
8 active in bullying prevention practices in Cyprus primary education. The  
9 professionals were engaged in a narrative-based professional learning process as  
10 part of the research. Each wrote short vignettes illustrating some aspects of their  
11 work (Jones, 2014) and participated in individual interviews, based on the  
12 vignettes. These were followed by three focus groups over a number of months,  
13 when the five participants came together with an aim to reflect on their practice and  
14 explore each other's perspectives and work with children concerning bullying  
15 prevention.

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17 The following illustrates the group's reflections on one of these themes:  
18 *pupils' reporting, or not reporting, bullying*. Enquiry trying to understand this topic  
19 has occurred in many countries and research has explored a variety of perspectives.  
20 In a large-scale study examining the responses to peer aggression in which 2766  
21 Dutch pupils from 32 Dutch elementary schools were surveyed, a percentage of  
22 58% of them reported the aggression to their teacher (Fekkes, Pijpers and  
23 Verloove-Vanhoricj, 2005). In another large-scale study the vast majority of US  
24 middle school pupils reported feeling sorry for victims of bullying, with two-thirds  
25 acting on preventing it (Agaston et al., 2009). In relation to the national context of  
26 this research, recent research by the Cyprus Observatory on School Violence,  
27 indicated a problematic situation where after witnessing bullying only 5.1% of  
28 primary school pupils stated that they reported it to their teachers, with the  
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percentage even lower in secondary education, with only 2.5% reporting to teachers (Papadopoulos et al., 2012).

### ***Research data***

The teacher's comments on this theme from the research will be used as a starting point to explore the ways the participants experience reflective practice within the focus group work:

'We [teachers] have to do with children who are at a very vulnerable age. Unfortunately, the emphasis in our educational system is given on trainings around subjects of the curriculum and not that much on trainings around classroom management and communication skills, something that we are lacking in a major degree. Sometimes teachers might don't know how or don't have the skills to respond properly when pupils report bullying and they try to make it 'light' in front of them, out of their need to offer comfort and compassion. On the other hand, children get the message that their teacher is not empathetic [...]. From my experience, I believe that things are changing and we see skilful and capable teachers, who are hands on. They individually seek more training in classroom management and communication skills and this is very optimistic'.

### *A process of meta-reflection*

The teacher's reflection was responded to by the other professionals, and the group began to redevelop questions and critically examine issues concerning educational policies, teachers' roles and responsibilities in relation to children's rights, empowerment and active participation on reporting bullying. The group shared and explored questions such as: 'Is creating trust between teachers and pupils the only way in achieving bullying report?' 'If

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3 “yes”, in what ways can we accommodate this?’ ‘Are teachers the only professionals who  
4 must work on fostering trust between them and their pupils deriving from their professional  
5 role and responsibilities?’ ‘What is the impact of the current educational system and its anti-  
6 bullying policies?’  
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13 This example of focus group discussion can be understood as a reflective-in-action  
14 process, in that each of the professionals takes an active stand in a process of creating  
15 meanings and understandings through dialogue and forging relationships. From this  
16 perspective, the teacher’s comments can be understood as an example of meta-reflection  
17 process (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014), in which a professional steps back and critically  
18 reflects on the wider context of their work. The teacher’s reflection shows her identifying  
19 elements such as lack of trust between pupils and their teachers. While this information  
20 provides a context for the issues in the teacher’s words, it is equally important to examine  
21 the teacher’s statement as a meta-reflection in action: she links her professional experiences  
22 and knowledge to her broader understanding of the context of the educational policy and  
23 school culture. Her words can be interpreted as illustrating that her professional individuality  
24 inter-relates with forces at micro, meso and macro levels. In the light of the relationships  
25 between macro and micro levels, for example, the teacher reveals her analysis of her  
26 situation as a perceived gap between policy makers and the daily experience of teachers,  
27 with the policy makers seen as failing to convince the actual implementers of the policies on  
28 their applying protocols in dealing with violent behaviour. At the same time, it also connects  
29 to her critically reflecting on her experiences by connecting the micro level of individual  
30 teachers and their work at the meso level of teacher training, continuing professional  
31 development and school policies.  
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58 *Sharing a space of reflection*  
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3 The following material offers data to enable the consideration of the nature of the  
4 interaction between the five professionals facilitated by the research, which led the teacher  
5 to a meta-reflection process. This discussion occurred *before* the teacher's comments:  
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10 *MT:* 'I would never force a child to speak up in front of a whole group.  
11 However if this happens, I would encourage him/her to speak more about  
12 it and address the rest of the pupils who will act as a support group.'  
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17 *SW: (Nodding positively)* 'I would do the same!'  
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20 *T:* 'Well, let me interrupt here. I'm trying to picture this with my  
21 classroom and I find it risky'.  
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25 *TP: (Referring to the MT)* 'I know what you are saying because we are  
26 working in a more creative way and this usually leads children to open  
27 up. However, I agree that addressing the issue to the rest of the classroom  
28 puts in jeopardy the pupil's emotional safety because he/she might open  
29 up and say things that they later regret.'  
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38 *EP:* 'I don't think there is right or wrong as long as you can handle it. As  
39 a psychologist, yes, I would probably open up the discussion to the rest  
40 of the group.'  
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45 *MT: (Referring to the TP)* 'So, what is your suggestion? Something came  
46 up and it seems that you are ignoring it.'  
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50 *TP:* 'On the contrary... I would reassure him/her by saying: "I hear what  
51 you are saying. Let's talk about it after we finish". Then after the  
52 workshop we could discuss the situation.'  
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57 *MT:* 'How about the rest of the group? Something happened in front of  
58 them. They need to respond on that.'  
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3 *EP:* ‘The way that each one would handle the situation, is a part of our  
4 professional practice. It is quite interesting because it is like we are  
5 saying the same thing but we understand it differently. I would  
6 personally calm him/her down and of course have an individual  
7 discussion with him/her. However, I would later ask the rest of the group  
8 how they feel about that.’  
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17 This extract evidences the appetite of the professionals to reflect together and illuminates in  
18 action the nature and value of how the research facilitated reflection. It shows how the  
19 participants are developing their understanding of their own work by exploring  
20 commonalities and differences with others, for example. Through the space, opportunity  
21 and relationships created by the research, they are able to ‘think aloud’ for themselves and  
22 engage in dialogue that deepens their awareness of their personal beliefs, attitudes and  
23 values in the context of those of their own professional culture and those of other  
24 professions. As this develops, it becomes a shared reflective process: they review their  
25 practice and the impact of that work on children. The shared reflection space gives the  
26 opportunity to the participants to find their place and role in relation to others and define  
27 their boundaries in the wider context of educational system.  
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#### 43 *Triggering reflective practice*

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46 In terms of understanding the nature and value of critical reflection, it is interesting to  
47 examine the dynamics at work within the data. What, for example, triggered or enabled the  
48 teacher to enter into the meta-reflection process? The moment immediately before her  
49 comment is illuminating in relation to this question:  
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55 *EP:* ‘One of the reasons that children do not report bullying is their  
56 natural fear of being called ‘snitch’. Name-calling is a huge thing among  
57 children.’  
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3 *TP*: 'I agree. They are afraid to talk. Part of my work is to introduce to  
4 them safe ways of reporting. During my workshops children often stood  
5 up and reported bullying by classmates in front of the group. They need  
6 to know how to control their impulsivity because there is the possibility  
7 for the 'bully' to be more aggressive after that.'

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14 Here the participants reflect on the pupils and the school culture from particular  
15 perspectives: in terms of group dynamics, emotions and where the school culture is one  
16 involving negative emotions. They echo and connect with each other by naming the  
17 educational setting as one of 'fear' and being 'afraid to talk'. The theatre practitioner  
18 directly reflects that they introduce something different as a professional that is not there in  
19 the school culture's 'norm', as they need to 'introduce' new approaches to interacting with  
20 adults: 'safe ways of reporting'. The teacher's words at the start of this section can be seen  
21 as her responding to this critique. She thinks through the input from the educational  
22 psychologist and theatre practitioner and her words can be seen to illustrate her critically  
23 questioning the role and responsibility of her profession.

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39 Initially, the five participants were invited to share their understanding on  
40 interdisciplinary approaches to bullying prevention. However, the research's focus group  
41 work became more than this. It became a space that can best be described as one where they  
42 explored, supported and tested their own understandings of their own and each other's  
43 practice. Through individual and shared critical reflective practice, enabled by the research,  
44 they identified challenges and opportunities between them and gained new understandings  
45 of bullying and anti-bullying multi-agency approaches: something that ultimately will  
46 benefit pupils' learning and emotional experience of school.

### **Example 3 Views of Psychotherapy: children, therapists and reflective practice**

#### ***Context***

‘Views of Psychotherapy’ is a practitioner research project which aims at evoking, representing and understanding children’s perspectives of their engagement in psychotherapy and those of the therapists. The context of the therapy is residential out of home care services in Malta. The research engaged children and professionals separately as participants in a process of critically reflecting on the service area. All therapists and children involved in residential out of home care services were offered the opportunity to take part. In line with practitioner research, research findings offer insights to both parties and aim to benefit the capacity of professionals by drawing on the critical reflections of both groups and, hence, influencing the development of the psychotherapeutic services offered by a multidisciplinary team of professionals working at a particular setting in Malta. Fifteen children between 9 and 18 years of age living in residential care and who had attended, or were still attending, psychotherapy sessions, consented to participate. Data with children was collected through ‘a flexible multiple method’ approach (Board, 2015). Children were offered a choice regarding how they wished to express their views. Five psychotherapists consented to participate in semi-structured interviews and in a narrative vignette (Jones, 2014) interview. All transcribed data was subjected to inductive thematic analysis.

This research illustration focuses on children’s and therapists’ views regarding some of the aspects which they perceived as difficult for children engaged in psychotherapy.

#### ***Research data***

*Experiencing difficulties within child psychotherapy and Improving Psychotherapy*

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3 Ten of the children all spoke about the challenges and difficulties of ‘opening  
4 up’. One, for example related the difficulty of opening up to the idea that opening up  
5 brings up painful inner material for the child.  
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10 *Participant:* ‘The more he speaks about them, I think the more he will feel  
11 sadness because he will start opening on stuff.’ *(pause)*  
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14 *Researcher:* ‘The more he speaks about ...’  
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17 *Participant:* *(interjecting)* ‘The more it can effect him but at the same time he  
18 is opening up his heart, he is not carrying them on his own.’  
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21 *Researcher:* ‘Interesting, so it is possible for him not to carry them on his own  
22 but if he opens up and talks ...?’  
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26 *Participant:* ‘He will feel sadness, it is obvious because he will start  
27 remembering and so, at the same time *(pause)* mixed feelings.’  
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31 The participant also spoke about ‘opening up’ as an important process that can alleviate  
32 the child’s distress. At the same time, he shows himself very much aware of the  
33 potentially distressing elements related to painful recalling of past events.  
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37 Within the theme ‘Improving Psychotherapy’ children also made suggestions regarding  
38 what could help mitigate such difficulties and discomfort or distress. For example  
39 children reflected on the psychotherapist’s responsibility in managing such difficult  
40 moments. one spoke about how the psychotherapist needs to notice the child’s  
41 discomfort and suggest a break during which the child could play. Some suggestions  
42 also challenged the orthodoxies of child psychotherapy practice. For of the children  
43 spoke about the value of knowing the therapist outside the psychotherapy space, the  
44 positive impact of therapy sessions outside the normal space and the need to be flexible  
45 with session time when needed.  
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3 Within the research process psychotherapists also communicated their  
4 awareness of potentially sensitive difficulties which a child may experience. They were,  
5 additionally, asked to respond to the anonymised themes identified by the children.  
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7 Therapist A shared that in her view the most difficult aspect for the child would be to  
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12 ‘access negative feelings’. She added:

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14 ‘I think that it is least helpful when you put pressure on them (to talk). When it  
15 becomes your agenda to go there, I think that is what is not helpful in therapy. I  
16 think with time I learnt this and it has to do with their timing. What you want to  
17 offer, even if you believe it is useful and important but it becomes unhelpful if  
18 you impose it.’  
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26 Not pressuring children to talk and respecting the child’s agenda, are prominent values  
27 within child psychotherapy’s practice context and are well enshrined in literature.  
28 Findings such as those above indicate how the research created an opportunity for the  
29 psychotherapists to consider their approach to children’s voices and views about the  
30 service, to contend with the unseen impact of complex contexts on their practice and  
31 hence the need to critically consider how they translate their macro level professional  
32 values and beliefs into their micro level lived practice with children.  
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#### 44 **Power and empowerment in reflective practice**

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46 All psychotherapists spoke about the value of respecting the child’s pace and  
47 supporting the child’s agency. Yet findings indicate that the possibility of children  
48 exercising their agency such as by giving feedback about practice, is influenced by adult  
49 beliefs. These are well anchored within the theoretical and practice discourses of  
50 psychotherapy and the manner in which children are conceptualised within such  
51 frameowrks . For example, when asked about what she thinks about asking children for  
52 feedback Therapist A, explained that she would do so:  
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3 'Only when I see that children would have achieved a position when they can  
4 reflect on this space. I think when they are very needy of the space. You would  
5 still be kind of fulfilling raw developmental needs or such. I think, I feel that  
6 they would still not be in the space where, they would not be able to disentangle  
7 themselves from the space to reflect on it. I feel that that happens later ... It is  
8 like I get a sense of whether he achieved that level where he can take it rather  
9 than being totally engrossed in this space or very needy of this space. When he  
10 is kind of confluent with this space, I kind of see it difficult for the child to  
11 reflect about what he is taking from the space. At times they tell you, 'I have fun  
12 coming to play'. Afterwards when they would have reached a certain level of  
13 integration even due to the work that I would have done with them, kind of, you  
14 start to get a sense that they can separate who they are from this space. And  
15 then they can give you feedback, what they are taking from this work, kind of  
16 what do you appreciate, where is the difficulty, what would you like to do more,  
17 do you think we need to continue meeting, do you think we can reduce (the  
18 frequency of sessions). But they can take it.'

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40 Such a response can be seen to offer a particular notion of critical reflection in relation  
41 to children's analysis and insights. The psychotherapist operates an interpretative gaze  
42 and decides when is it that 'they can take it', thus assessing the child's competence and  
43 mediating the possibility of the child's contribution towards the professional's reflective  
44 practice. It is interesting to see the ways the therapist creates a theoretical and practical  
45 frame of 'raw developmental needs' and 'difficulty' as a first response, which could be  
46 interpreted as negating children's agency by seeing their views as suspect or as limited  
47 due to their perceived emotional state. It is also interesting to see the difference between  
48 the therapist's example of the level of child feedback, 'I have fun coming to play',  
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3 compared with the depth and quality of critical engagement that the research revealed.  
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5 This could be seen to indicate an incongruity between the therapist's attitude toward  
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7 children's feedback and the actual quality of the children's feedback. This illustrates the  
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9 complex interplay between the potential value of bringing children's reflections  
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11 alongside those of adults to develop reflective practice and the culture of child  
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13 psychotherapy and adult power.  
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17 Creating and sustaining adequate spaces for the inclusion of children's feedback  
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19 within reflective practice is also about allowing professionals the space to doubt their  
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21 certainties and be surprised by new thoughts. As Therapist C communicated within her  
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23 reflection on her experience of her research involvement, such reflective practice can be  
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25 a challenging process:  
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28 'Eh... it's quite difficult. I wasn't looking forward to it ... No (giggles)... and  
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30 maybe this, this.. eh... helps me with clients too ....to hear their voices... cause it  
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32 is stressful ... it's like, sometimes it's easier to not talk about questions, about  
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34 things. (laughing) And I think, it brings out my doubts as well, my self-doubts  
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36 and I was not as, with children it's, it's very challenging.'  
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40 This research example shows how researching children's views of their own  
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42 experiences alongside adult therapist reflections on their work can contribute to  
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44 reflective practice by:  
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- 47 • facilitating an appreciation of the child's own process, the child's 'felt  
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49 sense' within the adult-child relationship
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51 • increasing practitioner awareness of their own 'situated knowledges'  
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53 which may otherwise remain unavailable for scrutiny
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55 • drawing attention to areas where children's views differ from adults'  
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57 views or challenge the orthodoxy of macro level established practices  
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- drawing attention to the impact of micro, meso and macro contexts on adult-child relationships and practices, including the practice of asking for children's feedback

### **Discussion across the three research examples**

The examples illustrate how research can create particular reflective spaces and illuminate the role research can have in creating particular kinds of interaction that facilitate reflection. They show how research can introduce dimensions that are normally excluded from reflective practices within a profession. The following considers aspects of reflective practice that are common across the examples and offers a summary of the nature of the reflection enabled by participants involved in the three research examples.

#### ***Reflection, insight and action***

All three examples illustrate how research can create spaces and relationships for participants that reflect Appleby and Pilkington's broad definition of reflective practice as involving professionals reflecting on their identity and the nature and impact of their practice. Example 1 shows early years professionals using the space created through research to express and develop 'a critical understanding of recent policy developments' (Robb and Thomson 2010, 1). Example 3 illustrates how the research enabled therapists to reflect on the complexities of how children's reflections feature in their work and relate to their own reflections on practice. Example 2, in its focus group extracts, shows professionals exploring how they see their own role and work. Through dialogue they examine together how they are 'defined as professionals' by others and in relation to educational policies concerning bullying prevention (Appleby and Pilkington 2014, 11). This also showed how the research created opportunities for interdisciplinary

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3 dialogue for participants, ‘exploring the different knowledge and knowledge  
4 environments’ to engage ‘purposefully with wider views’, including policy and others’  
5 perspectives and theory (Appleby and Pilkington 2014, 18).  
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### 9 ***Meaning making and empowerment***

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12 The extracts show participants engaged in reflection, examining the *meaning* of  
13 their work, connected to a commitment to professional *autonomy and empowerment*.  
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15 Example 1 shows the early years professionals reflecting in the extracts about the nature  
16 and impact of increases in bureaucracy and being subjected to managerial constraints  
17 aimed at accountability rather than meeting the practitioners’ perceptions of the  
18 children’s needs (Moss 2014). The research in Example 3 reflects the ways that the  
19 research enabled reflective spaces and opportunities, not only for the empowerment of  
20 the professional, but also for the children and young people involved in the provision  
21 service (Healy 2001), by enabling the professionals involved to access and include  
22 children’s perspectives in the spaces created by its enquiry. The discussion of research  
23 also illustrated the complexity of this. On the one hand, it advocates how a better  
24 understanding of effective practice can be developed by accessing children’s views  
25 rather than adult perceptions of children’s experiences alone. On the other, it shows the  
26 ways in which the theoretical frame and traditions within a discipline can mitigate  
27 professional development and insight by limiting the validity or worth of child service  
28 user views. The analysis of Example 1 identified how neoliberal performativity can  
29 impact negatively on working practices that enable spaces for reflection, and as limiting  
30 professionals’ sense of their ownership and valuing of their own role as one where their  
31 own critical reflections are of worth and can be implemented in their practice with  
32 children. It illustrates the role that participant involvement in research can play in  
33 challenging such limitations.  
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### ***Macro, meso and micro***

Each example illustrates how participant involvement was connected to the professionals making sense of the interactions between the macro, meso and micro. The analysis of the data in Example 3 shows how research can create spaces and access new voices, such as those of child clients usually excluded from reflection, to enable professionals to reflect on their beliefs about concepts such as development or children's voice and insight (Mann et al., 2009). Example 1 shows how research enabled professionals critically to reflect on the dynamics and tensions between macro level national and international neoliberal policies or administrative guidelines and how they affect their individual work and identity (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014). Example 2 shows the participants developing their understanding of their own and each other's work in the light of complexities of national level policies on bullying prevention. It shows how the focus group work enabled them to create a space and relationship with each other to reflect together on macro level policies connected to the micro levels of their lived experiences, concerning what factors encourage and form barriers to these policies, with an aim to developing insight and changes in their practice.

### **Conclusion**

This article has discussed the relationships between reflective practice and research for professionals who are research participants. The examples have addressed the gap in literature by presenting and analysing data to show how research can, as a process for participants, facilitate, 'stimulate and support critically reflective practice' (Pedlar et al. 2014, 22). The analysis of the three examples has shown the role research can have in creating particular kinds of spaces and relationships that facilitate reflection and how it can introduce dimensions that are normally excluded from critical reflection

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3 within a profession. The research examples have show this as involving: reflection,  
4 insight and action; meaning making and empowerment and the interactions between  
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6 macro, meso and micro perspectives.  
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