



**REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AS AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL METHODOLOGY:
INTEGRATING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES
IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

Ioana-Eva CĂDARIU

*Institute of Psychotherapy, Psychological Counseling and Clinical Supervision
“Tibiscus” University of Timișoara, Romania*

Marius MARICI¹

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania

Abstract

Reflective practice and critical reflexivity in social work education are increasingly recognized as a core set of practices that need to accommodate the complexities of professional tasks, uncertain ethics, and the emotional labor of practice that social work practitioners face. Using existing theoretical work, the current paper seeks to add depth to this literature by synthesizing research approaches from empirically related work that considers practices of reflection and reflexivity in social work practice and education. This discussion focuses on debating the context in which reflection is transformed from a theoretical understanding of practice into something more applicable. This paper draws on recent research to critically evaluate various approaches to reflection, including reflection journals, more embodied approaches to reflection, reflexivity-based educational approaches, and video-based approaches to reflection. Of key importance is the role of such approaches in the context of field educational work and transitions between educational roles and practice, where newly qualified social care practitioners are often exposed to conditions of especial risk and organization-based challenge. Findings indicate that reflection and reflexivity approaches work best when they are formalized, maintained over time, and provided support both at the educational and organization levels, as distinct from personal responsibility.

¹Corresponding author: marius.marici@usm.ro / +40-747-494-707

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1. Introduction

1.1. Reflective practice

Reflection for social work practice is often viewed as a broad professional attitude that facilitates social work practitioners to engage with practice situations in a critical manner, as opposed to applying theoretical approaches or procedural standards (Payne, 2002). In this respect, reflection is regarded as a dynamic process of re-interpretation of social work practice actions, decisions, and assumptions in the context of changing social environments (Moffatt, 2019; Ruch, 2002).

Firstly, reflection is crucial in promoting a critical approach to professional knowledge, unlike instrumental approaches that often ignore the relationship-building aspect of social work practice (Payne, 2002). Similarly, reflection helps social workers to resist approaches that regard theoretical concepts as fixed bodies of knowledge for application. Instead, social work reflection helps social workers to explore the construction, selection, and negotiation of theoretical concepts in social work practice (Moffatt, 2019). Additionally, critical reflection enables social workers to appreciate the limitations of major theoretical approaches while being sensitive to real social realities (Ruch, 2002).

Moreover, the relationship between reflection and critical consciousness about power relations is also very complex. Reflection for some authors is empowering if practitioners critically evaluate their own values, identities, and positions with respect to the users of services, especially in situations of inequality (Kondrat, 1999; Brookfield, 2000). Reflection in this context can be regarded as more complex since it involves not just self-reflection, but also a critical examination of the production of social work knowledge (Moffatt, 2019).

Within educational settings, reflection is increasingly regarded as a learning approach in pedagogy that fosters deeper learning and professional development. Modern social work education places great emphasis on reflection methodology for overcoming the divide between theoretical learning and practice-related challenges with regard to ethics, emotions, and relationships (Mishna & Bogo, 2007). Reflection exercises enable students to scrutinize their learning experience, challenge normal assumptions, and become better informed about their professional responsibility (Brookfield, 1995; Ruch, 2002).

However, it should also be noted that the embedding of reflection into the curriculum is accompanied by certain critical concerns. If reflection is homogenized into certain tasks, then the empowering role of reflection could potentially get undermined since it could continue to support mere compliance (Brookfield, 2000). This could lead to reflection becoming more of a technical need rather than a genuine process of professional reflection (Payne, 2002; Moffatt, 2019).

Supervision emerges as an important practice context for promoting the development of reflection (Vişcu & Marici, 2025; Vişcu & Marici, 2024). It is through reflective supervision that one can engage in critical analysis of their practice challenges, feelings, and values, aimed at promoting both learning and wellness (Pack, 2009). A reflection-based supervision practice helps transcend the monitoring role of supervision by transforming it into a dialogical process that strengthens critical thinking abilities (Pack, 2009; Ruch, 2002).

Nevertheless, critical scholars warn that reflection should be grounded in productive organizational environments to prevent becoming a personal responsibility for social work practitioners (Moffatt, 2019). If structural issues are not acknowledged at the institutional or structural levels, reflection could fall into the trap of masking structural issues by attributing challenges to issues of personal competence or resilience (Brookfield, 2000; Kondrat, 1999). A critical approach to reflection would locate it in conversations about social work, structural responsibility, and social justice.

In conclusion, it is possible to regard reflection for practice as a critical methodology that facilitates social work practitioners in dealing with uncertainty, questioning the power of knowledge structures, and responding to practice realities from an ethical point of view (Payne, 2002; Ruch, 2002). When reflection for practice is judiciously integrated into educational, supervisory, or practice settings, it helps to foster more socially conscious, critically aware, and ethically sound social work practice (Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Pack, 2009).

1.2. Critical reflection in social work education

An important theme running through social work education and practice is critical reflection, which for my purposes can be described as: A pedagogical and professional practice that seeks to connect learning with critical social analysis with the intent of allowing the individual or student to critically examine the context of practice application of learning or knowledge (Eyler, 2002; Fook, 2012). Contrary to being a cognitive solo practice, critical reflection is

more of a mediator between service, learning, and community engagement with social work practice viewed through a broad structural context (Eyler, 2002).

One of the key characteristics of critical reflection is the emphasis it places on learning through encountering real-world complexities, as opposed to learning through theoretical development. This is because critical reflection encourages students to critically reflect on their learning experiences both in community and placement, revealing the complexities between the ideals of practice and the challenges of the institutional, organizational, and policy context (Smith et al., 2007). Critical reflection disputes simplistic perceptions of practice by embracing ambiguity, uncertainty, and morality as key elements of learning in a professional context (Smith, 2011; Morley, 2008).

Furthermore, critical reflection draws attention to the role of relationships in learning by placing students and practitioners in the context of power relationships surrounding their encounters with service users and communities. Acting through reflective practice, students are encouraged to investigate the role of professional power, care, and responsibility in educational encounters, without necessarily presuming that such power, care, or responsibility are intrinsic qualities (Gair, 2011; Smith, 2011). This is important in indicating that reflection is necessarily tied up with positionality concerns or issues in social work practice (Fook, 2012).

At the same time, critical reflection is assumed to play an increasingly important role in challenging the depoliticization of social work education. In situations where the practice learning curriculum is becoming increasingly driven by performative or managerialist approaches, critical reflection becomes an important aspect of questioning dominant forms of discourse that construct social issues excessively in individualized terms (Morley, 2008; Fook, 2012). In drawing connections between personal experience and structural analysis, critical reflection is important for developing critical consciousness in social work students (Eyler, 2002).

Critical reflection does not emerge naturally or necessarily through practice alone. It was found that students often face significant challenges with regard to reflection, especially in regard to the scaffolding of reflection tasks that become limited by assessment needs (Smith et al., 2007). Hence, for effective critical reflection to occur, it is important that it be developed through careful learning design that creates engaging but challenging contexts for reflection (Smith, 2011; Gair, 2011).

Ultimately, critical reflection in social work is a praxis that involves the integration of learning from experience with critical social theory. It provides social work with the ability to engage

with structural inequalities by creating spaces for reflection that enable students, social work practitioners, and communities to engage (Fook, 2012; Morley, 2008).

2. From Critical Reflection to Meaningful Professional Learning in Social Work Education

Contemporary literature in social work education is tending increasingly to a perspective that agrees that reflection or critical reflection should be thought of as a means of development integrated into practice learning rather than as a discreet educational methodology. Reflection is given significance by placing it in a context where students are engaged with uncertainty, moral dilemma, or structured inequality (Das & Anand, 2014; Ruch, 2002). Reflection is then a means of applying a linkage between experience, moral reasoning, and responsibility.

Experiential and field-based learning contexts are always regarded as core components of developing the ability for reflection, especially with regard to their role in addressing the complexities of practice that pervade real-world settings. Exposure to multiple communities and organizational settings helps in disrupting existing beliefs about professional roles and social issues, thereby creating the possibility for more in-depth forms of critical reflection (Das & Anand, 2014). However, some researchers indicate that mere experience can be detrimental, as it can perpetuate dominant discourses without any critical guidance (Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

In the context of learning institutions, the effectiveness of reflective learning is observed to be better grounded in intentional approaches to learning that legitimize uncertainty, discomfort, and investigation. When students are engaged in reflexive learning tasks that support dialogue and critical inquiry, they are able to move past descriptive representations of practice to address more substantial issues related to ethics and power (Ruch, 2002). Hence, it is revealed that the process of reflective practice is dependent on the individual learning facilitator's capability to establish learning environments that support critical engagement, not mere compliance.

At the same time, it has been found that there exist significant structural obstacles that impede reflective learning in both educational institutions and work environments. A performance culture, workload, or management concerns often conspire to render reflection inconsequential, pushes it into the personal responsibility category, or takes it out of shared practices among professions (Faller et al., 2020). This often undermines the potential of reflection to make an impactful difference by disconnecting from organizational learning or ethics (Lymbery, 2003).

One of the major concerns that exist in the literature is related to the dominance of competence-based models of education. While the models aim to ensure standardization and accountability, they continue to be criticized for confining professional learning to their competency-based outcomes (Lymbery, 2003; Ruch, 2002). This could potentially undermine the development of creativity, judgment, and ethics that are necessarily called for by unpredictable practice scenarios (Lymbery, 2003; Ruch, 2002). Hence, practices of reflection and critical reflection are seen as corrective practices that provide scope for interpretation.

Theoretical contributions: These contribute to the literature by reframing the concept of reflection as an iterative, rather than linear, process. A linear process would see reflection as moving from experience to evaluation. Instead, reflection is thought of as a spiral process, whereby understanding is enhanced through the inclusion of emotional engagement, professional identity, and context (Ruch, 2002). This reframes the binary relationship between theory and practice by highlighting the continuing relationship between them in reflection practices.

Critically reflective practice enhances the framework by placing emphasis on the structural aspects that form the basis of professional practice. The authors believe that reflection is limited if it is individualistic in approach without taking into consideration issues of power relations, culture, and inequalities in society (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Adding a structural analysis perspective to reflection helps increase the effectiveness of social work education for preparing students for complex practice settings that are both ethical and political.

Empirical research seeking to explore the transition phase between educational institutions and professional practice helps to clarify the role of poorly integrated forms of reflective learning. Graduating students surveyed often state an increase in self-awareness and theoretical development, yet concurrently feel poorly prepared relative to their decision-making, risk, and organization skills (Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham et al., 2023). Findings suggest that forms of reflective learning need to be strongly related to field education practices.

The ethical significance of reflective practice becomes particularly evident in contexts characterized by risk and the possibility of error. Reflection on mistakes is identified as a crucial source of professional learning, enabling practitioners to recognize systemic vulnerabilities and improve decision-making over time. However, this potential is often undermined by organizational cultures of blame that discourage openness and learning from failure (Sicora, 2017).

Taken cumulatively, these efforts contribute to a better understanding of practices of reflection and critically reflexive practice as the root of professional agency, ethics, and resilience in social work practice. When these elements are systematically integrated into the curriculum, practice, and work context, reflection serves as an integrating practice that bridges experience, structural understanding, and responsible practice, contributing to the development of social and ethical practice (Fearnley, 2022; Tham et al., 2023).

3. Practical Implications of Reflective and Reflexive Approaches in Social Work Education and Practice

Recent empirical research suggests that the application of reflection and reflexivity in social work education is of the highest utility if it is framed in a structured learning approach that helps students and young practitioners manage complex, uncertain, and emotionally driven realities. Today, reflection and reflexivity are no longer mere educational concepts, but increasingly viewed as application-based processes that make it possible for practitioners to make sense of their practice environment through a distinct process of identity formation (Pack, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2019).

One of the key application areas of this is related to structured reflection instruments that need to be implemented in field education. Online reflection instruments, such as longitudinal reflection methodologies, ensure a continuum between practice opportunities and educational learning by allowing students to revisit their reflections on practice encounters that took place earlier. Such instruments support reflection by allowing students to engage with an online analytical framework that allows for reflection that is not limited to assessment tasks but facilitates students' abilities to connect experience, affect, and learning (Pack, 2014).

Apart from reflection through writing, recent scholarship emphasized the importance of living or embodied forms of reflection that engage the learner beyond mere cognitive processing. Creative techniques such as sand tray therapy and role play through video enable students to externalize their complex experiences, investigate relationship dynamics, or test other responses in a controlled learning setting. The application of such techniques aims to improve emotional intelligence, communication skills, or relationship understanding, concepts that are core to effective social work practice but difficult to achieve by formal learning or instruction (Amas, 2024; Kelly et al., 2024).

A further important implication relates to the establishment of personal reflexivity as an important professional skill. Such educational practices that center on reflexivity invite

students to examine the influence of their biographies, values, or social position on professional judgments, as well as their relationships with users of their services. This reflexive stance helps with sensitive practice in morally complex environments characterized by power disparities. It is important to clarify that reflexivity is viewed not merely as introspection but as a skill that improves accountability in practice (Cavener & Vincent, 2021).

Literature pertinent to the transition from education to work recognizes the important protective function of reflection and reflexivity in the earlier years of professional socialization. Social work graduates often report a sense of disorientation, overwhelmed feelings, or uncertainty in responding to the demands of their new setting. Reflection, through formal supervision or support systems, is critical for integrating these events into a meaningful framework. In the absence of such arrangements, reflection tends to become either reactive or disintegrated, with negative implications for positive practice and personal welfare (Tham & Lynch, 2019).

In terms of skill development, reflection for learning has shown to improve communication skills. Video-reflection techniques enable the student to observe themselves, gain personal feedback, as well as critically review their verbal and non-verbal communication. This is immediately applicable for improving practice, as it helps students become more aware of their own interactions, ensuring that their communication style is adaptive with their clients (Kelly et al., 2024).

Scholarship that is developing suggests that the practice of reflection is broadened by including issues of embodiment and spirituality in the contemplation process. A practice of reflection that considers issues of embodiment and spirituality allows a person to become better equipped with strategies that help to cope with issues of meaning, loss, or moral suffering that occur in practice (Tufford, 2025). This is a way of expanding the role of reflection that is more practically significant in work that is carried out with vulnerable populations.

Analysis of the reviewed literature suggests that the application of reflection practices is most effective when reflection is integrated into the curriculum, practice of fieldwork, and professional support services in the early career of social work practitioners. Longitudinal reflection techniques, using creativity, embodied practices, reflexivity-led pedagogy, and reflection-based supervision make it easier for social work practitioners to emerge who are more emotionally intelligent, grounded, and better equipped to tackle potentially difficult social work practices that they encounter in their day-to-day practice. It is significant to note that reflection should not remain an individual student responsibility or the sole duty of social work

practitioners but should be an institutional responsibility shared by learning institutions (Pack, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2019).

4. Conclusions

This review highlights the core importance of reflection and reflexivity practices in improving both social work education and practice by being firmly incorporated into learning or development practices in social work. Within the reviewed research, reflection is not just a marginal teaching practice but a key process through which students and practitioners connect their learning with their experience, their ethics, their emotions, or their development of their social work identity (Pack, 2014; Ruch, 2002).

Firstly, it seems that the results indicate that reflection practices reach their peak levels of effectiveness when they move away from individual reflection practices and are integrated with supportive tools for reflection, creativity, embodiment, and approaches that value reflexivity. These are factors that make it easier for professionals to work on developing key skills such as ethical reasoning, relationship-building skills, resilience, or dealing with complexity, especially at critical junctures like transitions between educational institutions and work environments (Tham & Lynch, 2019; Kelly et al., 2024). At the same time, it is also clear that the context plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of reflection practices, implying that reflection should not remain an individual responsibility (Faller et al., 2020).

Overall, the evidence reviewed suggests that there is support for moving towards an understanding of both reflection and reflexivity as more integrative, developmentally-based practices that connect learning with practice, as well as practice with ethics. Such consistent integration of both concepts would support social workers' better critical and humane engagement with complex social realities, thereby promoting more ethics-informed practice (Thompson & Pascal, 2012; Tufford, 2025).

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