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Reflections on navigating the PhD journey as a social work practitioner

Abstract

Practitioners who undertake PhDs find themselves in a unique research position. They have a dual role of being a researcher, as doctoral candidate and also a practitioner. This paper describes my reflections on the journey of doing a PhD as an experienced social work practitioner. Firstly, I describe my study which designed, developed and evaluated a psychoeducational intervention for foster carers in Ireland. Then, I discuss my reflections on my position in the research and how I theoretically framed my study in a pragmatist approach. I discuss the challenges I experienced as a practitioner and doctoral candidate. I conclude that my position as a practitioner and doctoral candidate was likely to have enhanced my research and the contribution it has made to social work practice.

Keywords: PhD journey, doctoral candidate, practitioner-researcher, positionality, reflexivity, pragmatist approach

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Introduction

Practitioners who undertake doctoral study find themselves entering a new world, the world of research. Research and practice traditionally stem from two distinct worlds, have different orientations and involve different activities (Gomm and Hammersley 2002). However, practitioner-doctoral research may be a way to integrate these two worlds. It may also be a way to enhance the research produced, and in turn being viewed as more accessible and more likely to be applied in practice (Brookman-Frazee et al. 2016). Practitioner-doctoral research may also be more likely to be transferable in real life practice settings when there is an understanding of contextual issues. Internationally, there is an agenda for building researcher capacity in social work practice (Lunt and Shaw 2017). In Ireland, the state child

welfare agency has also acknowledged the need to build its research capacity. It is viewed as important to support the development of policy and enable evidence-based practice decision making and high-quality service delivery (Crosse and Canavan 2016). This agenda may have been fuelled by social work practice being criticised for underrating the value of research and not integrating research into practice which is documented in other countries (Erbay 2017, Trocmé et al. 2016). There is also a recognition that gaps exist in child welfare systems to promote a strong research culture (Goemans et al. 2018). Practitioner-researchers, such as the practitioner-doctoral candidates, are viewed as being ideally located to undertake such social work research (Goemans et al. 2018, Trocmé et al. 2016). Negotiating relationships is central to social work practice, a comfortable and familiar space for practitioners. These skills translate well to carrying out practice based research (Ruch and Julkunen 2016). Thus, practitioners as doctoral candidates may be in a position to successfully bridge the gap between the two worlds of practice and research.

This paper describes my reflections on carrying out a practice-based doctoral study as an experienced social work practitioner. Firstly, the study is described, then how I identified my position in the research, the application of a pragmatist approach and how I navigated the dual role of practitioner and doctoral candidate in the study.

The study

The purpose of the research was to design, develop and evaluate a psychoeducational intervention for foster carers. This intervention aimed to enhance the capacity of foster carers to provide children with trauma-informed care. Over the course of three years, the research followed a complex methodological sequential design that involved key stages developed by the Medical Research Council for the development and evaluation of complex interventions (Craig et al. 2008).

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The Development Stage (Stage One) involved completion of a narrative literature review of the effects of current trauma-informed care interventions for foster carers. It also involved a pre-intervention qualitative study that assessed the current practice climate and support for implementation of this intervention. The narrative review suggested that trauma-informed care could inform foster carers' responses when caring for children who have experienced trauma. Participants in the pre-intervention study expressed the need for such a programme. They also described their willingness to support its implementation in the current context of foster care in Ireland. A mixed method approach was used to synthesise the results of the narrative review and pre-intervention study to develop the group-based intervention, *Fostering Connections: The Trauma-informed Foster Care Programme*. The Feasibility Stage (Stage Two) involved a programme review by the local Fostering Social Work Team.

At Evaluation Stage (Stage Three), a quasi-experimental study with a control group and a post-intervention qualitative study were completed. These two studies were combined using a triangulated analytical strategy to complete an early stage evaluation. A Stakeholder Group was established at the outset of this research to provide expert review to the research process. Preliminary evidence was promising and suggested that *Fostering Connections* may be an effective intervention for increasing foster carers' capacity to provide children with trauma-informed care. This, in turn, was associated with improvement in child regulation and reduce peer problems over time (Lotty et al. 2020). My doctoral study concluded that this intervention is likely to make a significant contribution to the training provision for foster carers in Ireland. It is also likely that this intervention will support foster carers capacity to care for children with trauma-related difficulties. The intervention is likely to, in turn, reduce child difficulties and thus, support placement stability.

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My Position in the Research

During the course of my doctoral journey, I explored and developed my understanding of my research position through a reflexive process (England 2006). I located myself in a unique position as a doctoral candidate in a practice context. Thus, I occupied two roles simultaneously. I described myself as a social work practitioner doing doctoral research. I identified as being 'an insider' in the research (Finlay 2002). I came to this research from a practitioner role (McDermott 2005), a social worker on a Fostering Team. I am a stakeholder in foster care and I have researched my own profession (Blythe et al. 2013). I came to this research, with pre-existing views of practice; I was familiar with the context, having a shared experience with some of the practitioners who participated in this research. However, this insider position came with a caveat in relation to the foster carers. I recognised that as I am not a foster carer, I am not a true insider but am an outsider in the realm of the foster carer's experience. An inherent power imbalance separates me from the foster carer's experience. This power imbalance is found in the foster carer-practitioner relationship which by its nature involves accountability and supervision. Thus, the foster carer occupied a different position than me in this research. Thus, my position placed me on the inside of the practitioner's world which *was* connected to the foster carer's world. This position also brought with it some of the knowledge and assumptions of the foster carers' experience to this research.

The position of being an 'insider' has brought benefits to this research. My position enabled immediate access to participants within the child welfare agency. My position also supported an ease in establishing trust and rapport with participants. This was underpinned by an in-depth understanding of the foster care system and practice culture. Thus, I brought a sensitivity to practitioners and foster carers experiences. I was also mindful that, the disadvantages of being an insider are often highlighted as risk of bias in the research. The insider is seen as being at risk of becoming too subjective and unable to separate their

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experiences from participants (Breen 2007, Holmes 2014). Thus, from the outset I examined mu position by engaging in a process of reflexivity. This involved efforts to separate out my experiences from participants through journaling, engagement in supervision and being guided by a well-defined research design.

At the outset, because I occupied an insider position as a doctoral candidate in this research, there was a need to reflect on a number of positionalities and identities. Positionalities and identities that stem from my personal, professional values, my organisational role and responsibilities and research codes of practice during this research process (Hopkins 2007). I recognised that this research is deeply connected to my practice. I was personally invested in this research. I was highly motivated to produce research that contributed to improving outcomes for children in foster care. My social work practitioner background influenced my decision to ensure the methods of research reflected the values that underpin evidence-based practice (Gambrill 1999) and collaborative, empowerment and anti-discriminatory practices (CORU 2019).

Firstly, the value base of my position as an insider was reflected in the belief of the importance of producing empirical knowledge and evidence of programme efficacy. I wanted to produce research that provides supporting evidence for programme efficacy. I felt that this was likely to make a contribution to evidenced-based practices in social work. In developing an evidenced-based intervention, this also may promote real changes to foster carers' lives and in turn ultimately to the children they care for (Akin et al. 2014). Thus, I was driven to produce research that was rigorous and robust that assessed intervention efficacy so that the intervention would be transferable in real-life settings. The motivation to produce efficacious and transferable results was also driven by the need to produce acceptable evidence for decision and policy makers that hold the power to implement this intervention (Bryson et al. 2014). Thus, the research process involved determining the efficacy of the programme through

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experimental reliable and valid methods. The research process, thus, reflected a post-positivist approach by seeking to develop a hypothesis for testing and validating (Grix 2002).

Secondly, my position as an insider was rooted in a value base of collaborative, empowerment and anti-discriminatory practices. This was reflected in the belief that research was best carried out in collaboration with the key stakeholders in foster care. Further to this, knowledge constructed by these key participants in the research process was reflected in a collaborative research perspective (Moore et al. 2015). This was particularly important for foster carer participants who in practice often feel that their contribution is not valued or included in decision making processes around the children they care for (Megahead and Lee 2012, Sanchirico et al. 1998). A key principle of the developed intervention, was the recognition of the crucial role foster carers play in the lives of children in foster care. This resonated in the research process through their inclusion at key points of research. This included foster carer representation in a Stakeholder Group which providing feedback during the research process, participation in pre and post intervention qualitative studies. The foster carers' views and perspectives were, thus, valued in this research and viewed as an important contribution to the construction of knowledge.

Thus, my position was underpinned by the belief that the nature of knowledge is not restricted to one paradigm. This has led me, with time and care, to locate this study in a pragmatist theoretical approach (Morgan 2014) and subsequently to a methodological framework that reflected this position (Craig et al., 2008). The pragmatist approach appealed to me as it provided me with a systematic and coherent theoretical approach that combined two methodological approaches of quantitative and qualitative methods. The pragmatist approach anchored my position and supported me in navigating a complex and ambitious doctoral study. It has also supported me to ensure the ethical and methodological rigour of my doctorate study

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was adhered to and in turn to produce comprehensive and richer research findings (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009).

Application of a Pragmatist Approach

A pragmatist approach, as framed by the social scientist methodologist David Morgan, provided a conceptual framework for my doctoral study (Morgan 2007). Morgan (2014) points out, that traditionally there has been a reliance on metaphysical versions of the philosophy of knowledge in social research. These are framed within distinct paradigms that guide the process of developing knowledge in research (Grix 2002, Lincoln et al. 2011). They frame research in philosophical perspectives and assumptions (Gringeri et al. 2013). The pragmatist approach does not emphasise the distinct theoretical approaches such as post-positivism or constructivism (Biesta 2014). It replaces traditional epistemological standpoints with a worldview that emphasizes experience. While it views knowledge as being encountered through experience and thus, all knowledge as socially constructed, it also views the world as real, having an independent reality (Yefimov 2004). It is thus, concerned both with subjective states and the objective world as it views experience as involving both.

Morgan (2014) has drawn on the work of philosopher John Dewey to develop his approach to pragmatism in social research (Kaushik and Walsh 2019). Dewey (2008) was concerned with the relationship between actions and consequences. He contended that our actions can never be truly separated from past experiences and beliefs. Thus, thoughts about the social world are linked to actions within the social world as the consequence of actions inform out thoughts about future actions (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Morgan (2014) describes three widely shared elements that underpin pragmatism. These are:

1) actions cannot be separated from the situations and contexts in which they occur,

2) actions are linked to consequences in ways that are open to change, and

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3) actions depend on worldviews that are socially shared sets of beliefs (Morgan 2014). These shared elements highlight how pragmatism is most concerned about the nature of experience rather than the nature of reality (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Firstly, the emphasis is not on an objective truth; there is no concept of a universal truth or reality in relation to an action. Pragmatism asserts that actions develop 'warranted beliefs' wherein truth and reality are understood as influenced by the experience of previous actions and the unique context of the situation (Morgan, 2014, p.26). Thus, the influence of the context cannot be separated from the actions and thus, over time the experience of actions in a given context and the consequence of those actions come to inform a worldview. Secondly, pragmatism also asserts that actions may change as the context differs. The experience of any given situation can never be experienced exactly the same again as context do not remain static. This underpins the idea that beliefs are in a constant state of evolution owing to the influence of ongoing experiences. Thirdly, the nature of beliefs is interconnected and not seen as a single entity. Pragmatism contends that it is experience that shapes our worldview and influences our actions and thus, beliefs are connected to actions. Pragmatism also views experiences as being unique to the individual and thus, the exact same experience cannot be shared by another person. Pragmatism emphasises, a worldview that is unique to the individual, but at a wider level beliefs and knowledge may be shared when experiences are in effect socially shared. Thus, pragmatism understands knowledge as being fundamentally based on experience. Thus, all knowledge is social knowledge. Pragmatism at the same time, views both the world as being real *and* socially constructed.

The pragmatist approach represents the research process as an experience that involves examining beliefs that have become problematic and can be resolved through action (Dewey, 2008). Experience is seen as inherently historically and culturally located (Scott and Briggs, 2009). Experience also as having an emotional, embodied element that is linked to

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beliefs and actions. Thus, knowledge is developed from pre-existing thoughts that evolve into research questions, based on problematic experiences (Brierley 2017). In my doctoral study, the pragmatist approach was reflected in the recognition that was my practitioner experience (pre-existing experiences) that led me to carry out this research. I did not set out to 'get' a PhD. My motivation was deeply rooted in my practitioner experience. My first hand experiences of the impact of placement breakdown on children and their foster carers, lack of collaborative practices between practitioners and foster carers and foster carer burn-out greatly influenced my decision to complete a doctorate study.

Pragmatism is also goal orientated, focused on the future and to contribution to change, aligning with the core values of social work (Haight and Bidwell 2016). This was also reflected in my study as it sought to make a contribution to improving practice and supports for foster carers. The study had an overarching aim to develop an intervention that supported foster carers caring for children with challenging needs. Thus, I sought to make a difference, to make a meaningful impact in the lives of children in foster care. Essentially this research was goal orientated seeking to make a contribution to social work practice. I identified the research problem as a perceived gap in evidenced based interventions that support foster carers caring for children that have experienced trauma. This, in turn led to the objective of this research being to develop an evidenced-based intervention.

The pragmatist approach reflects a value driven and needs based orientation (Johnson et al. 2007). It aligns with the core values of social work in that it views the consequences of the actions as having more weight than the preceding actions (Hothersall 2016). Accordingly, pragmatism is viewed as having a strong association with the objectives of social work research (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The decision to take a pragmatist approach in my doctoral study was informed by my values of the importance of evidenced-based practice and

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taking a collaborative research perspectives. I was concerned with contributing to change, how the consequences of the research could contribute to social work practice.

The pragmatist approach accepts there are multiple realities open to inquiry whilst emphasising that reality is only encountered through experience (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). My study involved two distinct methodological approaches, each underpinned by substantive epistemological differences. I gave due consideration to the two traditionally distinctive paradigms of post-positivism, informed by objectivism and constructivism, informed by subjectivism. Grix (2002) identifies these paradigms as the two main traditions in social research. The post-positivist approach, allows for the adoption of a factual objective and deductive strategies to produce empirical knowledge, knowledge is viewed as objective 'truth' that is measurable and observable (Grix 2002, Ritchie et al. 2013, Creswell and Clark 2017). The constructivist approach empowers participants to construct knowledge through explorative and inductive strategies. The constructivist approach asserts there is not one reality. Knowledge does not pre-exist but comes into existence through one's engagement with the world. It is an on-going process, and it is the experience and agency of participants in the research process that produce knowledge (Ritchie et al. 2013). Taking a pragmatist approach allowed me to be more concerned with the approach to inquiry rather than the philosophical paradigm (Beista, 2014). It values the contribution of natural world (post-positivism) and the social world (constructivism) (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Hence, the approach allowed me to choose from a range of methods that was required to navigate a complex study design.

The disadvantage in taking this approach was that it required a wide skillset and was time-consuming. However, as a researcher 'in training', this greatly appealed to me. It gave me the opportunity to develop skills in distinct methodological approaches.

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The pragmatist approach views the research process as a human experience based on the actions and beliefs of the researcher (Morgan 2013). This process of research involves the continual interaction between beliefs and action. This was reflected by a back and forth movement in the pursuit of knowledge as opposed to a linear process (Stige et al. 2009). This experience opens up possibility for creating knowledge that may be underpinned by drawing on diverse paradigms (Brierley, 2017). The principle of complementarity is also emphasised in pragmatist based research where different methodological approaches can be combined that complement each other providing shared meaning to a phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). The findings of each method when combined provided depth and breadth (Greene 1989) and credibility (Creswell and Clark 2017) to the data. My doctoral study reflected this as both quantitative methods using deductive reasoning and qualitative methods using inductive reasoning were used. At the integrative phase, abductive reasoning was employed, going back and forth between deduction and induction strategies. The integrative phase generated knowledge from two different methodological approaches (quantitative and qualitative) by assessing if they produced valuable themes of complementarity.

As the pragmatist approach is not limited to the use of one methodological approach. It is also concerned with theories being both generalisable and contextual and can be analysed for transferability to another setting (Shannon-Baker 2016). Pragmatist informed research accepts that an objective reality is separate from human experience (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019), however, it recognises that reality has a context and can only be encountered through experience (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2010). This was reflected in my doctoral study which incorporated contextually rich findings into empirical results. The integrative phase involved findings of the post-intervention qualitative study that served to contextualise the findings of the overall study.

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Navigating the challenge of being a practitioner in a doctoral study

From the outset and during the course of this research, I clearly identified my research position as an insider, having a dual role of doctoral candidate and practitioner. This posed a number of methodological challenges, given the risk to bias and over-subjectivity. I sought to understand my influence on the research and continually reflected on my position in the research process through a reflexive approach. Holmes (2014, p3.) defines reflexivity as 'a multi-faceted, complex and on-going dialogical process, which is continually evolving'. This process was familiar to me as a 'reflective practitioner'. I extended this into my research experience. Reflexivity in the research process was supported on many levels. The use of a reflexive diary (Nadin and Cassell 2006, Ortlipp 2008) helped me to disentangle my role as researcher and practitioner through written and visual reflections. For example, a diary entry on the 30/11/17 describes the how I engaged in a reflexive process. I sought to develop an awareness of my expectations of the data gathered from the post-intervention focus groups and was motivated to separate out these expectations in interpreting the data:

> *'Qual data so rich and huge- difficult to manage and to stay focused on what's in the transcripts as (I) know feedback from foster carers plus (I) know what to expect- (the) theory (is)- finding what's in the data not what I think is in the data- listening to voice- (this) fits in nicely with X's Ethics lecture- listen to voice, a reflexive stance needed on- not imposing my own assumptions, staying true to the transcripts.'*

Thus, the reflexive process helped me to continually reflect on my research practices and assumptions as it provided a private space to 'work out' my feelings, thoughts and actions in the process.

This internal process was often preceded and/or came after the external process of engagement in supervision which provided another level of reflexivity. My supervisors brought an outsider perspective to the process, enabling me to engage a different lens on my

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research practices. As my supervisors came from the separate disciplines of social work and psychology they also provided an interdisciplinary perspective. Supervision provided me with a considerable source of knowledge, critique and support throughout the research journey. It involved supporting me in engaging in a reflexive process as it provided a space to critically question and explore my position in the research. Supervision also supported me to manage the emotional impact of this process. They provided a safe space to explore my feelings evoked from separating from the practitioner world. They encouraged me to embrace the research world pushing me to develop my critical thinking.

Many conversations with colleagues, mentors, fellow PhD students and feedback from conference presentations also supported the process of reflexivity. These also provided other perspectives that helped me examine my presence in the research process and minimise the risk of research bias and reactivity. This was experienced as a dynamic process and a shift in identity over the course of the study. Reflexivity helped me move from a purely insider (practitioner) position into a researcher position. However, at the same time, I did not move into an exclusively researcher position. I sought to locate my identity in an overlapping space.

There were times when I got stuck, unable to move into this in-between space. For example, I experienced a real sense of being stuck during the data analysis stage of post-intervention qualitative study. I questioned myself, if I could truly represent the participant's experience as my experience as the lead facilitator of the intervention was entangled with theirs. Becoming unstuck required separating my experience from theirs. I had to step out of the practitioner space to create a distance and ability to engage reflexivity and critically with the data.

It involved engagement in supervision at each step of the analysis. Supervision sessions involved discussions on identifying repetition, similarities and differences and key words in the data. As we moved towards developing the emergent themes, supervision

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sessions involved discussions on the number of themes, theme integration and an ongoing guidance of moving towards a more integrated and coherent analysis. My supervisors referred to this as a process of 'filtering down'. They provided an 'outsider' perspective and brought a clarity that helped guide me to use a researcher lens. I was guided to ask questions such as 'what does the data reveal?'

The reflexive journaling also helped to get me into the mindset of the researcher as I could reflect on such issues. The concept of being the story maker resonated with me (Malterud 2001). The idea of becoming the story teller really helped me get into this mindset (Schiellerup 2008). I reflected on my role as one of becoming the storyteller. I was motivated to represent the participant's story, what was *in* the data, remaining conscious of my knowledge that was present in the research process. This required a level of self-critique and questioning of my influence in the interpretation process (Stige et al. 2009). This process was challenging. It was very time-consuming and it was recursive, involving long periods of supervision and many drafts. It involved becoming really immersed in the data, going back to *listen* to 'the voices' in the raw data with a researcher ear. It involved *seeing* the data in the transcripts with a researcher's eye and to check on supervision notes to guide me in interpretation of the data.

It involved self-discipline as the data was so interesting and relevant to my practice, I found myself being distracted from the purpose of the study. For example, the study produced rich data with regard to participants' views on relationships between social works and foster carers. This topic I was and remain very invested in. Whilst, it had some relevance to the study, my supervisors steered me back to the focus of the study. I returned to the research questions often as a guide to support me through the story-making process. Slowly a pathway out of the 'being stuck' emerged, and turned to a sense of a moving towards developing a

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coherent story that was authentic. The supervision process was used as a form of triangulation to promote credibility in navigating the research process.

The selection of extracts was also a challenging process. It involved sense of having 'to let go' powerful and meaningful extracts that captured participants' emotion. I had not expected some participants to share very personalised experiences that could possibly identify them. Thus, I could not risk exposing their identity and so did not use them representing an outside perspective. I reassured myself that all the data have had a part to play in the story-making as it has influenced the research process.

Overcoming these challenges was experienced as a shift from being the 'insider' to becoming a 'practitioner-researcher'. I developed more of a critical approach. I learnt to 'immerse myself in the data' (as my supervisors often said) while also creating a distance from my experience of the intervention.

It was only in the latter stage of the doctorate, in year 3, when I started to feel comfortable in the 'inbetween' space. At this integrative stage where I triangulated the results from the post-intervention outcome study (quasi-experimental study) with the findings from the process evaluation (post-intervention qulaitative study) this became apparent. I was aware that my position in the research as an 'insider' with practitioner experience influenced the research process. I was also aware that as the programme developer, I may have had bias in being motivated to achieve positive programme evaluation findings. However, I felt comfortable, now well practiced in employing and engaging in a reflexive process (3 years in) that I could minimise bias. The task did not seem as daunting as in the early stages of my PhD, where I often questioned myself if I could 'see the wood from the trees'. I was more confidence in my research skills experiencing less bouts of the PhD candidate dreaded 'imposter syndrome'. I continued to use strategies of reflexivity which included the use of a reflective diary and engagement in supervision. The supervision process had also shifted,

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now, I experienced a shift in my supervisors as they more confidence in me! This helped me to embrace more of an 'outsider' position, using a research lens and motivated me to achieve the highest standard of research rigour I could.

Adherence to a triangulation protocol, with each step systemically applied, also helped to reduce bias in the integration process. This process allowed me to explore the data for both positive and negative findings. This is when I knew I had become a researcher, the truth mattered more to me than positive findings. That was a transformative moment, I was interested in finding dissonance and silence across the datasets. Such findings I felt, would be helpful in future programme development and implementation. . For example contradictory priorities and perspectives between facilitators and participants are likely to impact the level of engagement by participants (Heslehurst et al., 2015). The words of a foster carer from the post-intervention qualitative study of her experience of receiving the intervention, resonates with my experience. She described her experience as involving getting into a reflective space that allowed her to be open to new learning and reframe her understanding of the children's behaviour:

> *"I found it grounded me, actually, that I am more present, you know, even though you get worried about you kids all the time, you be worried, worried, worried. Now I can be more rational about it....I understand the tantrums and bad behaviour,* ***I am learning more from their bad behaviour, than their good behaviour****, I find that very strange." (Foster Carer)*

Becoming neither one nor the other

Here I am, having successfully defended my doctoral thesis, completed my revisions and am waiting to graduate. Interestingly, I think my examiners could see the journey I have taken as clear as day, both in me and in my thesis. This is not something I had dwelt on prior to the viva. They 'loved' my chapter one. They described it as an in-depth contextualised

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knowledge of the foster care system. This reflected my knowledge as an insider. After all, this was my bread and butter for 20 years. They 'loved' my chapter seven, the integrative phase. This concurred with my own sense (and my supervisors) that I had developed sound research skills at this point of the study and had completed an excellent mixed methods study. They encouraged me to articulate this process in the viva and more in my thesis.

The journey was a transformative experience. I clearly see where my journey started and where I am now. I have clear sense of the process involved. It involved establishing a sense of clarity about my position and its dynamic nature. It involved feeling grounded in a transparent well comprehended theoretical framework. It involved feeling confident that I had a well thought out study design. It involved acquiring new knowledge and reframing existing knowledge. It involved 3 years of continually engaging in a reflexive process. It involved shifting my position during the study but also it involve a change to my professional identity.

I no longer describe myself as purely a practitioner but at the same time I am not a traditional researcher. I am neither one nor the other. I identify with occupying a space described by Lunt and Shaw (2017) as involving either research or practice but involves elements of both. Resonating with other researcher-practitioners, I too experienced the journey as uncomfortable. It was isolating at times, particularly in the early days as I was no longer the same as my colleagues. I was seen as different. However, the journey was also experienced as immensely rewarding. At this juncture, I have developed a new skillset, increased my capacity for critical thinking and developed a language to express these thoughts articulately and concisely. I have achieved what I set out to do, to make a contribution, a difference. However, I am left with a hunger to continue this journey in developing my knowledge and skills and to continue to make a contribution to practice through research.

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To conclude, I consider that my position as a practitioner-doctoral candidate was likely to have enhanced the research produced in my doctoral study. My doctoral study has produced an evidenced-based intervention for foster carers. This intervention is currently being rolled out to all foster carers in the research sites. The intervention is likely to make a significant contribution to training provision for foster carers in Ireland. It is also likely that this intervention will support foster carers' capacity to care for children with trauma-related difficulties. The intervention is likely to, in turn, reduce child difficulties and thus, support placement stability.

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