PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS, COLLABORATION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

Implications For Policy And Practice (An Exploratory Study)

ALLAN YOUNG* AND MARK MINOTT†
University College of the Cayman Islands and Independent Researcher, UK

Abstract

The Public Sector, like the private sector, does encourage its workers to collaborate on tasks, but rarely do we find this in the workplace, workers being encouraged to reflect their job tasks. This is primarily done in educational settings. This study sought to elicit responses regarding how sixty five public sector workers in the Cayman Islands engage in collaboration on the job as well as integrate the discipline of reflection in their daily job tasks. Civil Servants engaged in a problem solving class were asked to respond to questions on collaboration and how they use the reflective process in their jobs. Those involved in this exploratory study indicated that they regularly collaborate with their peers and found it fulfilling. A further revelation of this study was that Civil Servants in this context were convinced that there was room to improve in their jobs and suggested that they most times reflected on “how things have gone, and try to understand why they turned out as they did”. Public sector management can leverage this understanding of collaboration and reflection to improve the public sector.

Keywords: Reflective practice, collaboration, public sector, civil servant, policy and practice

* Email: ayoung@ucci.edu.ky
† Email: Minott.mark@icloud.com
INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE

While there is an abundance of literature on reflective practice and collaboration, the concepts have been confined to the regular school classroom. There are very few studies which apply these teaching/learning methodologies to the area of public sector working and/or management. A search of the terms, ‘reflective learning’ and ‘collaboration’, and ‘management’ on the Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO) data base returned (3) articles. The British Education Index (BEI) free collection returned (0) articles. The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) returned (0) articles. We did, however, find articles addressing the areas as separate disciplines. Also, in the Cayman Islands, there is no known local research which examines these areas.

Given these facts, the aim of this study is two-fold; one, to identify what constitutes collaborative and reflective practice among local public sector workers, and the extent to which these workers engage in these activities on the job; and, two, to discuss implications of these happenings for policy and practice.

We commence this paper with an outline of what constitutes reflective and collaborative practice generally, and indicators of these activities on the job. We end with an outline of the study, which forms the basis of the paper, and a discussion of the implications of the findings for public sector policy and practice.

Reflective Practice

Gayle and Gayle (1999) see reflection as thinking about what you do, and Farrell (2001) sees it as thinking critically about what you do, which involves recall, consideration, and evaluation of experiences. For the purpose of our study, reflection is careful consideration or thought; it is a process of disciplined intellectual criticism combining research, knowledge of context, and balanced judgment (critical thinking) about previous, present, and future actions, events or decisions (Minott, 2009). Reflection does not exist in an abstract sense, but is enacted through job related tasks, actions, events or decisions. A common feature of the reflective practice process is the questioning of ‘self’, that is, one’s beliefs, values, assumptions, context, and goals, in relation to tasks, actions, events, or decisions (Zeichner and Liston, 1996).

In light of this, reflective practice is an approach to problem solving that uses reflection as the main tool. It encourages individuals to create distance between themselves and their practice. It involves them analysing, discussing, evaluating, changing and developing their workplace practices by adopting an analytical approach to their work. Sometimes this process is triggered by an experience or an
unexpected incident (Boyd and Fales, 1983). Brockbank and McGill (2007) agree with this definition when they state that reflective practice is a process that occurs in a social setting, and it involves a context (workplace) and experiences (work-related tasks, events or situations). Individuals are actively engaged in the process and with others in open dialogue, with the expressed aim of transforming and improving self and the environment. As this thought hints at the idea of collaboration, we will examine the area in some detail later in this paper. So, to summarize, reflective practice is the use of critical thinking to aid in analysing, discussing and evaluating experiences, so as to develop work-related knowledge and improve work-related practices. This process may also result in the discovery of new insights, theories and perspectives.

As indicated in this definition, critical thinking is a co-requisite of reflective practice. It is characterised differently by various writers. Fowler (1996) lists over fifteen definitions of critical thinking proposed by fifteen different writers. There are some similarities as well as differences to these. An examination of the definitions of critical thinking suggests that the writers all agree on the fact that its binding characteristic is that it is primarily a mental or cognitive process with particular outcomes—such as arriving at appropriate:

- Beliefs
- Patterns of reasoning
- Conclusions about whether to reject or suspend judgment on an issue
- Understanding the meaning of an issue or statement
- Logical inferences
- Evidence and following where it leads
- Decisions about material by distinguishing between facts and opinion
- This list of outcomes of critical thinking displays the different uses and results of the application of this cognitive skill. For example, critical thinking can be applied to a particular situation and a conclusion drawn in regard to what to believe or what actions to take, or it can result in making logical inferences.

**Collaboration In The Workplace: Types, Benefits And Challenges**

As indicated in the foregoing discussion, collaboration is important to reflective practice and the practitioner, for it is through dialoguing and interacting with others that appropriate contextualised solutions to problems and situations can be found and implemented (Schon 1983, 1987). The literature reveals that there are different types of collaboration, and benefits and challenges of collaboration in the workplace.

Types of collaboration include cross-functional collaboration, where members
of a team have different functions, but a common goal on which they are working. Specialized collaboration involves team members with the same skill set and similar experiences and partnership, where points of intersection are discussions by various departments in the organization. There is also community collaboration where the goal is learning—rather than completing a task—, and network collaboration, which starts with an individual with a particular personal interest, and grows into a network of other individuals with a similar interest (Callahan, Schenk, & White, 2008).

There are also several benefits to workplace collaboration. For example, it makes use of individuals with different perspectives, thus covering a variety of angles. Collaborative activities reduce error in thinking and actions, enable people to move beyond limited individualized vision, and generate new ideas and solutions. It also encourages creativity, because it brings together different ideas and accommodates out-of-the-box thinking. It brings balance to decision making, for it helps to root out the occurrence of biased or partisan decisions, because each stakeholder has a presence around the table and can facilitate the timely completion of projects (Jones, 2011; Alamgir, 2011).

Despite these benefits, there are also several challenges of collaboration in the workplace. For example, there is the risk of ‘group-think’. This occurs when the stronger personalities manage to persuade and supplant their ideas as the outcome for the group (Jones, 2011 and Martel, 2004). There may also exist possible ambiguities in roles and responsibilities. If these are not clearly defined, the result can be chaotic. Additionally, the cost of collaboration can be high, especially if members of the group work and meet across international borders and time zones. This occurrence may also lead to longer decision times (Jones, 2011 & Johnson, 2006). A very important challenge with collaboration in the workplace is conflict within the group, which may be caused from perceived unequal workload among group members, non-contributors, and mistrust (Markel, 2004, Jones, 2011, Johnson, 2006).

While the foregoing literature review highlights potential indicators of reflective practice and collaboration generally, what remains unknown is the extent to which local public sector workers engage in reflective practice and collaborative activities, and the extent to which they do so on the job. Based on these questions, a study was launched.

**Methodology**

The study utilised a survey methodology and focused on how those in the public sector viewed the issue of reflective learning on the job or within the public sector context. Essentially, the investigation utilised individuals attending the Civil Service
College, an arm of the University College of the Cayman Islands (UCCI). Most of these individuals (for one reason or another) were just now completing tertiary education, after having raised families.

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was developed and implemented as part of a problem-solving class attended by civil servants. The questionnaire sought to elicit responses from civil servants regarding their ability to work with others and being a reflective practitioner at the same time.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: the first labeled “Working with Other People” contained six statements measuring participants’ disposition in working with people. The second labeled “Becoming a “Reflective Practitioner” also had six questions. The statements were measured using a rating scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represented total disagreement with the statement and 5 total agreement. The questionnaire had only two demographic items, the gender and employee status (supervisor, manager or regular employees).

**Participants**

The participants for this exploratory study were students enrolled in the Civil Service College—an arm of the University College of the Cayman Islands, UCCI—who were pursing courses to complete the Certificate or Associate degree in the Public Administration program. There were 65 participants, who were either supervisor-managers or regular employees. In the Civil Service College, the 65 participants reflected a little less than 40 % of the enrolled Civil Servants at the time the survey was carried out, but, as suggested, the target participants were those in a specific class entitled ‘problem solving’.

**Data Collection Methods**

A one-page questionnaire was utilised to facilitate the survey, which was carried out in two parts. First, with 25 participants in one semester, and an additional 40 participants from other classes in another semester. There was not double counting of individuals since the classes were quite different and the forty students were not students at the time the first set of questionnaires were administered. Although there were 65 participants, five questionnaires were rendered unusable since the participants failed to complete the relevant questions. During the administration of the questionnaires participants were encouraged to be honest in submitting their responses on the two variables being investigated. All students had an option to refrain from
answering the questions, but were encouraged to respond. After less than 10 minutes the questionnaire was collected.

**Data Analysis Process**

All the questions on the questionnaire were coded; those in the first section were coded as W’s—indicating work collaboration—, and those in the second section coded RP—indicating a measure of reflective practice. Each questionnaire was entered in SPSS, where several key statistics were computed, including a T-test. The responses reflected collaborative or reflective levels among key group managers and workers as well as differences that exist between female and male civil servants.

**Findings And Discussion Of Questionnaire Responses**

What constitutes collaboration among public sector workers and the extent to which these workers engage in this activity on the job?

Table 1 displays the statements utilised to indicate collaborative activities in the workplace and the mean scores accompanying each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W1 I regularly work as part of an effective team and enjoy it.</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2 I really enjoy testing my own perceptions against theirs.</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W3 I feel that I always make a valuable contribution to a team and help others contribute.</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W4 I can be assertive as is necessary if the occasion demands.</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W5 I am happy to admit to being wrong.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W6 I look forward to the group work and other collaboration</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixty five participants responded to the questions about working with people in their departments or within the public sector. The results indicated that for the most part participants were positive about their work relationships in the public sector. The average score for three of the six statements were greater than 4 and ranged from 4.07 to 4.23; these scores indicated that Civil Servants/Public Sector workers were extremely satisfied about how they value their contribution to various teams existing in their workplaces, but even more revealing was the fact that they could be assertive in a team setting if the situation warranted this.
The nature of, and high response to, questions W3 and W4 are eye-opening, because they indicate that civil servants saw themselves as making a contribution to the ‘team’ while being equally assertive. We can infer that it is likely that participants in this study were involved in a type of cross-functional collaboration, where members of a team have a common goal on which they are working (Callahan, Schenk, & White, 2008). This common goal and understanding can be the catalyst and grounds for group members to assert themselves if the established goal has been contravened. The benefits of this type of collaboration are many, for example, it reduces error in thinking and actions, enables people to move beyond limited individualized vision, and generates new ideas and solutions (Jones, 2011, Alamgir, 2011). These benefits of collaboration can be very important to the public sector, which is saddled with the responsibility of producing, delivering and allocating goods and services by and for the government or its citizens. For example, the generation of new ideas and solutions is not only desirable, but essential to the smooth functioning of every aspect of a government, especially in this period of rapid change and development.

While a large number of respondents (mean score: 4.23) highlighted the fact that they can be assertive as is necessary if the occasion demands it, Jones (2011) and Martel (2004) point out that this can be a challenge if not carefully handled. For example, it can lead to ‘group think’, which occurs when the stronger personalities manage to persuade and supplant their ideas as the outcome for the group; this also reduces the generation of new and creative ideas. This is important because decisions influenced by ‘group think’ have a low chance of a successful outcome (Janis, 1972). Faulty decisions that result in low successful outcome could reduce the efficacy of any government civil sector.

Also worth noting is that question W2 was the least favored collaborative activity highlighted by respondents (mean score 3.48). This question speaks of participants’ ability to value and ‘enjoy’ testing their own perceptions against those of members in a group. The idea of testing ones perceptions against another person’s (if not carefully done) could lead to conflict in the group, as well as non-contribution and mistrust among group members (Markel, 2004, Johnson, 2006, Jones, 2011). The less than ideal response to this question could be attributed to the fact that the wording of the question connotes competition rather than collaboration. Perhaps rewording this question could have aided in achieving a higher response rate, thus a higher mean score.

Based on the findings, we will conclude that collaboration among the public sector workers who participated in this study involved a type of cross-functional collaboration, where members of a team have a common goal on which they are working (Call-
lahan, Schenk, & White, 2008). The extent to which these workers engage in this activity on the job is reflected in the fact that they often contribute to team decisions and help others to do the same, and are assertive when necessary. Their least favorite collaborative activity is testing their own perceptions against their co-workers’.

**What constitutes reflective practice among local public sector workers and the extent to which these workers engage in this activity on the job?**

Table 2 displays the statements utilised to indicate the workers’ reflectivity and the mean scores accompanying each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RP1 I am convinced that there is room to improve on how I do things.</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP2 I routinely reflect on how things have gone, and try to understand why they turned out as they did.</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP3 I routinely discuss things with colleagues to see what we can learn.</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP4 I always keep a log in which I note learning points from my experience and set myself new learning targets.</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP5 I enjoyed those activities in the previous sessions that asked me to think about my own experience.</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP6 I am aware of what my learning style is and this helps in my routinely assessing areas of concern and taking corrective actions.</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results highlighted in Table 2 indicate that—overall—participants were positive about their ability to engage reflectively with their jobs. The high response rate to RP1 (mean score 4.62) suggests that participants have given great thought to—or had reflected on—their jobs, and by so doing concluded that there was room for improvement.

This attitude of reflecting on one’s job and arriving at a conclusion, such as the need for improvement, is not just important for public sector workers to embrace as they engage in the business of producing, delivering and allocating good and services by and for the government or its citizen, but it is also important because it is a catalyst for self-directed professional development (Minott, 2010). Also of importance is the fact that a large number of participants (mean score 4.03) routinely reflect on how things have gone, and try to understand why they turned out as they did. This activity points to the fact that they are actively engaged in ‘reflection-on-action (Schon, 1987).

What is also worth noting is that question RP5 was the least favored reflective ac-
activity highlighted by respondents (mean score 3.83). This indicates that participants did not enjoy the classroom-based activities which required them to think about their own experiences while on the job. This low response rate is not surprising, given the fact that ‘self-reflection’ is a learning activity that is seldom encouraged and practiced in many workplaces (Minott, Young & Matthews, 2011).

Additionally, we will conclude that reflective practice among the public sector workers who participated in this study involved reflection-on-action (Schon 1987). The extent to which these workers engage in this activity is reflected in the fact that they thought about their job and were able to conclude that there was room for improvement. Just as important was the fact that they also routinely reflected on how things had gone, and tried to understand why they turned out as they did. This too is in-line with Schon’s idea of ‘reflection-on-action’. Their least favorite reflective activity is self-reflection.

How do men and women in the Civil Service view collaboration and reflective practice?

Tables 3 and 4 reports on how male and female participants view collaboration and reflective practice in the Civil Service. With respect to collaboration in the workplace, men showed a slightly higher mean on all the statements regarding collaboration, except statement W6. Interestingly, the statement espoused group work, to which one would expect women to be more open than men. Although not conclusive, the mean score was slightly higher and indicated a slight preference in this area. The test did not indicate any significance in terms of all six statements.

Table 3- Means and Standard Deviations for Male and Female Civil Servants with Regard to Work Place Collaborations (N: Male =22 and Female =38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The p values in Table 3 regarding the six statements about Civil Servants’ collaboration did not yield any significant information regarding male and female thoughts regarding collaboration within the work workplace. The comparison of males and females on each of the dependent variables with regard to reflective thinking on the job did not yield anything significant and, as such, did not indicate that there were significant differences between how men and women viewed reflection on the job.

**Table 4- Means and Standard Deviations for Male and Female Civil Servants with Regard to Workplace Reflective Practice (RP) (n: Male =22 and Female =38)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>0.650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>1.365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>-1.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>-.847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>.684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\(p<.05, df = 58\), a: Degrees of freedom was reduced because equal variances not assumed Using Levene’s test of equality for variances.

**Conclusions And Implications For Public Sector Policy And Practice**

This study involving civil servants’ views of collaboration and reflective practices in the workplace elicited how these unique groups of workers handle these two important tasks. When analyzed as a group, there was an indication that—overall—civil servants valued group work as a collaborative means when completing their tasks. The findings also disclosed that they were more apt to be involved in reflection on the job. Comparison between male and female Civil Servants did not yield any significance as to differences between the gender when there was a need to collabo-
rate on the job or to use reflective strategies when carrying out their tasks.

The 2008 economic meltdown continues to have some effect on workers in the private sector; neither has the public sector escaped the effects. Resoundingly, there is a call for workers—whether in the private or public sector—to be engaged in meaningful ways to do their jobs and so provide optimal quality service aimed at helping to counteract the effects of a poor economic climate.

This study does have implications for those who lead in the public sector. First, collaboration is an essential ingredient of any successful organization, and the public sector is no exception. Public servants who collaborate on the job are more likely to improve productivity and, consequently, feel a sense of being on the job. Secondly, in reflecting on their tasks as workers in the public sector, there is likelihood that employees will improve job processes and thereby aid in achieving the goals of most public sector entities. Like other public sectors, the Cayman Islands takes pride in providing its workers with an education, as well as other tools that will enable them to be efficient and effective in the workplace.

Collaboration in problem solving as well as reflecting on one’s task as a public service worker can only aid in building optimal relationships in the workplace, which aims at sharing and providing opportunities for doing tasks more efficiently. Such relationships, steeped in trust as well as the opportunity to engage in reflection, ultimately engage the worker in a deep assessment about job tasks, which will also lead to increased productivity. In a more general context, Minott, Young and Mathews (2011) stated that management should be cognizant of the importance of reflective learning used in the work environment. This inclusion of reflective practice will act as a catalyst in “accomplishing strategic goals in the organization”—not only will it impact human capital, but it will ultimately impact the organizational review process. High-ranking Civil Servants who are aware of the benefits of collaboration and reflective practice may contribute by discussing and implementing policy issues that will positively impact the quality of the work environment in the public sector.

Limitations Of The Study

Firstly, a limitation of this study is the non-inclusion of data regarding how managers and supervisors feel about the areas investigated in this study. If this aspect was explored comprehensively, then clarity in this area would further elucidate the importance of both collaboration and reflective practice in adding value to tasks being attempted within the work environment in the Civil Service. How this could be addressed is attended to in the recommendations for further study below.

Secondly, the results of this study may not be generalized since a deliberate and
concentrated group was used. It was not convenient to survey all 108 unique course takers at the time, or better yet the over 3,000 civil servants who worked for the public sector at the time the study was done. The focus was on those who were engaged in a problem-solving course and so cannot be considered as representative; however, the findings might help to encourage others to pursue more in-depth investigation.

**Recommendations For Further Study**

Although this explorative study does have some limitations, it provides a springboard for more in-depth studies in the area of reflective practice in the public sector, with a view of creating efficiencies. As in other areas where reflective practice has been used, the public sector would serve to benefit and, as such, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Conduct interviews with managers, supervisors and regular workers within different units of the public sector within the Cayman Islands. In order to strengthen this suggestion, the same data could be used to provide comparisons between the supervisors and workers in the areas of collaboration and reflective practice in the public sector.
- Conduct regional studies among Caribbean countries and compare reflective practices within the public sector and its impact on public policy and practice.
- Study the impact of reflective practice and its impact on worker productivity.

**References**


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