

“Developing Reflective Work-Based Learning in Therapeutic Child Care : Innovations and Challenges”

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Abstract

Existing government sponsored training programmes for child care workers in England are of a significantly lower standard than those in Europe and are ineffective in developing staff to a suitable professional level. This case study reports on the development of an employer-led work-based learning foundation degree for staff in the care sector, one which prioritises reflective thinking as the main modality in which to develop staff. The paper will discuss (i) the impact of failures elsewhere to develop high levels of reflective thinking for child care workers (and the subsequent impact upon children in their care) (ii) the case for reflective thinking as a way of developing professionalism in WBL and (ii) the practical challenges of putting reflective models of learning into practice on a WBL foundation degree.

The paper utilises literature to propose a way forward via presenting a case study of an independent child care provider, The Mulberry Bush School, establishing their own Foundation Degree course, in conjunction with the University of West England, as a leading example of reflective work based learning. The paper will discuss the levels of reflective practice that can be achieved through such an approach.

This paper concludes by considering the wider implications for introducing a real work based learning programme across the English child care sector and bringing the sector in line with the more reflective and professional European Social Pedagogic model of training and development.

“Developing Reflective Work-Based Learning in Therapeutic Child Care : Innovations and Challenges”

“The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.” –D.A.Schön (1983: 68)

Introduction

Sometime during the snowy week that seemed to paralyse much of the UK in early 2009, I entered a residential children’s home where I met Kate, a residential child care worker, who described a shift in which she had become overwhelmed with feelings of sadness when Jack, a seven year old boy at the home, had started to talk openly about watching his mother die from drug abuse.

Normally Kate is someone the children turn to when feeling sad, but she described how Jack was devastated when she told him she could not listen any longer; she had other work to get on with.

Several weeks later this piece of work was discussed with Kate’s new manager who encouraged her to link the interaction with her own background. Kate started to identify her own feelings about the death of her mother when she was a child. Although Kate has worked in child care for several years, no-one had previously supported her to link her own experiences and emotions with her work, nor to reflect upon such interactions and use them as a tool for learning.

Kate has been diligent in ensuring she undertakes all the local authority training, so why had no-one supported her to reflect on her work and experiences before?

A well worn phrase

The phrase “reflective practitioner” is well used in the field of child care and education, with many reports advocating this as a central modality for workers. So why does the experience not fully match the recommendations, as shown in the vignette above?

Perhaps it is the overuse of phrases such as “reflection”, “reflective practice” and “reflective practitioner” which have come to cover almost any form of evaluative, systemic or thoughtful process (Ecclestone, 1996), that confuses us to what we really mean.

Through using a case study and supporting literature, I will explore the impact of a work-based learning approach to staff development, as a model that supports the development of a 'reflective capacity'.

Social Pedagogy

The trend in social, including residential child, care towards the employer/Higher Education link to develop a skilled workforce has been explored by many authors; see Bennet et al (2000) and Boud et al (2001). But the issue of developing the reflective capacity of child care staff has not been specifically discussed in relation to the work-based learning approach.

Much of Western and Northern Europe, have adopted a social pedagogical model which recognises residential child care as a profession with most staff trained to degree level. This differs significantly from the UK where child care qualifications are based on an out-dated and generic NVQ Level 3, which supports staff to evidence their practice rather than develop as workers. Most European models of social pedagogy place an emphasis on professionals to constantly reflect on their practice which is often, outside of Therapeutic Communities, missing in England. Many European models place greater social value on residential child care as an intervention for children, with Germany placing over four times as many children in residential care as England, who place only 13% of Looked After Children (Statham and Mooney, 2006).

In England the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (DfES, 2007) proposed the piloting of social pedagogical approaches, the results currently being analysed, though some scepticism exists. The idea that social pedagogy is a unique model fails to recognise the multiple interpretations that exist from country to country, influenced by history, society and culture, and the convergence with the Therapeutic Community model pioneered in the UK since the Second World War. The social pedagogy model emphasises everyday activities such as mealtimes, play and sport as opportunities for children and adults to work together in forming relationships, much as the therapeutic communities continue to do. As such this drive to search for something new and exciting has had a cautious response from the UK tradition of therapeutic child care.

However the European models of social pedagogy do offer one significant learning opportunity for the UK - Training !

Reflective training

Child care training programmes have developed significantly since the mid-1980's but there is still a sense that 'reflection' is a "buzz word" or "this year's model" as residential children's homes are re-structured, re-staffed or become warehouses for the most vulnerable children. Staff often fail to be a constant presence, supervision can be minimal, training in-effective and a reflective culture often replaced by periodic attempts to "be reflective". Training attempts to ensure staff are reflective, yet continues to be delivered in contrived classroom environments rather than embracing the radical work-based

learning approach that is spreading across higher-education offering real-life opportunities (Boud and Solomon, 2001).

The need for reflective practice is vital to support residential staff to tolerate and contain the emotional impact and extreme levels of disturbance they face. The culture of reflection allows workers to offer reflection and understanding to the children in our care (Diamond, 2009). Such failure to develop high-levels, or any levels, of reflective ability has too often resulted in a lack of containment and care for the children.

A refusal to recognise organisational culture, and its approach to learning, as one of the most significant factors in staff development, with learning clearly shaped by the learners environment (Gray et al, 2004), further inhibits the effective work staff are able to undertake with children. It is vital that this point be adopted at a national level if staff training is to develop.

A way forward

For 61 years the Mulberry Bush School has worked with some of the most emotionally disturbed primary aged children in the country. The work is founded on psychodynamic principles with reflection on feelings and experiences central to the therapeutic experience. The school is independent of the local authority and has been able to create its own staff development models.

As a school we deemed the social pedagogical model to be lacking, as a sociological model it failed to fully consider the emotional interactions and relationships that are essential when working with high levels of emotional disturbance. The adoption of a psycho-social model, which accepts the emotional and social needs of the disturbed child, is far more relevant to the work we undertake in understanding and helping children overcome their emotional difficulties.

With trepidation the school chose to abandon the Government sponsored NVQ training programme in autumn 2006. Whilst we felt NVQ had done little to develop our staffs reflective skills, it remained the mandatory model of training, which we would be inspected against, and sadly the only model that enabled national funding, despite its insufficiencies (Crimmens, 2000).

Effective child care training in England has long been “patchy” and the range of alternate training models available to us were few and far between. As such we sought a like-minded University to support us in the development of a new qualification, one which would prioritise reflective thinking as the main modality in which to develop staff whilst allowing us to adhere to Government standards.

The matching of organisational philosophies, rooted in the ethos of work-based learning and underpinned by a culture of reflection and enquiry, was key to identifying an appropriate academic institution.

The Centre for Psycho-Social Studies at University of West England (UWE) was approached to co-develop an appropriate qualification. The timing and remit fitted perfectly with the recommendations of Lord Leitch (2006) that 40% of the UK workforce should be trained to a level 4 standard, and the promoting of employer led qualifications. Jointly we entered the time-consuming process of designing and validating an innovative Foundation Degree in Therapeutic Work with Children and Young People.

In September 2008 the first mixed cohort of twenty one Mulberry Bush School care workers commenced their University studies. The group included new staff, experienced care workers and junior managers. The work-based learning course has been designed to make substantial use of observations of practice as a method of assessment supported by a range of written assignments.

One of the most significant advantages to the school of adopting a work-based learning model was the potential it offered our non-traditional learners to access a different form of higher education, or the 'new higher education' that Boud and Solomon (2001) predicated would develop.

A strong culture of reflective staff supervision exists throughout the school supporting students to identify the complex connections between their learning and their practice. Students engage in multi-disciplinary work which is reflected in multi-disciplinary seminars where a requirement is to present aspects of their work to their peers for reflection and group learning.

Reflective thinking as a way of developing professionalism

The need for reflective thinking as a way of developing professionalism in work-based learning environments such as residential child care is essential. As a model it supports staff to develop their critical thinking and a questioning attitude whilst promoting competence through the evaluation of experiences and the subsequent learning of how to address these for future practice (Papadima-Sophocleous, 2006)

Emphasis is placed on supporting students to develop as individual reflective practitioners but also as part of a reflective team within a reflective organisation. Students are required to work closely as part of a range of teams and need to be able to understand and reflect upon the range and intensity of the feelings that arise from the work. They need to develop the ability to 'speak the unspeakable', to help the children 'speak the unspeakable' whilst managing the subsequent impact. There is significant risk within the school that our work becomes inhibited by the powerful unresolved feelings that transfer between children, the students and other staff. Therefore emphasis is placed upon workers developing "reflective practitioner" skills, becoming reflective in terms of exploring and learning from experiences but also in terms of reflective whilst in the midst of the work, often in the midst of crisis (Ward, 2006).

A primary question was whether the work-based learning model could enhance child care workers reflective capacity. The course was written to ensure reflective practice was at its core, although the reflective module is the

least “taught” module of the course, instead requiring students to learn experientially and through the work-based learning model. Exclusive delivery of the course within the workplace has enabled students to absorb the fundamental principles of the work-based learning approach more fully.

Students participate weekly in seminars which reflect on their day to day work, exploring issues such as containment, child-development, organisational dynamics and professional roles. Students were already participating in regular reflective supervision and team spaces but additional developments have included the utilisation of reflective journals and marked assignments.

Students are supported in maintaining reflective journals as a means of guiding and recording their journey, to understand the overlap between work experiences and their own lives as a way to inform learning and practice (Best, 1998). Whilst many were dubious, feedback indicates most students found the process a significant aide to developing reflective abilities and entries have been used through reflective and theoretical assignments bridging the gap between theory, practice and self.

Course staff have taken the role of facilitators of learning rather than didactic teachers enabling a dialogue and relationship to evolve between all members of the learning community and allowing students a reflective dialogue which can breach the paradigms of their world (Brockbank and McGill, 2007).

Raelin’s (2008) model of four explicit practices of work-based learning (the learning team, journaling and portfolios, developmental planning and developmental relationships) complimenting one another provided us with further evidence of the relevance of this model for developing reflective practice and was adopted as a core model for the design and implementation of the course. This model has assisted students to distil learning from day-to-day experiences, allowing them to track their development through the course.

Practical challenges

Although the use of reflection has been central to the schools work since its inception, we were mindful that simply putting a reflective model of learning into practice would not be straight-forward, nor an answer to developing further a truly reflective workforce. What was intended was an enhancement of an existing organisational culture, as one factor to developing staff.

One unforeseen impact, particularly for those managing students, was the level of anxiety and pre-occupation with the course. This had an initial impact on students’ direct work but diminished after students successfully completed their first assignments and was subsequently felt to be offset by the increased levels of learning and reflection passed into teams and certainly provided dynamics to reflect upon!

The importance of involving students’ line managers was a vital, though at times contentious, issue to ensure learning was supported throughout the day to day task and not relegated to a second-rate strand of the work. This

challenged the organisation as to whether we collectively supported the model.

The true nature of measuring reflective capacity also poses significant difficulties and questions. Is there an automatic correlation between reflective ability in a staff team and enhanced child care practice? Whilst we would hope this was the case it can not be taken for granted, thus measuring reflective ability in teams is undertaken in addition to the monitoring of child care practice.

One of the potential risks of the work-based learning model, not yet encountered, is the impact of students 'failing' in their learning. The assessment of the course is, in part, through observations of practice supported by written work which reflects practice. As such the notion of a worker failing an assessment draws significant concerns on their competence to practice. Can a failing student's practice be fit for purpose? Clearly the model needs to be pertinent to the individual student but an expected standard needs to be established, something that has previously been lacking in training programmes.

What can really be achieved?

Evidence from managers and students alike clearly indicate that students' reflective abilities have developed as a result of the course and its roots in work-based learning. This is supported by my own observations of students' development in their ability to think reflectively and develop their own sense of enquiry. The application of this enhanced reflective capacity is not fully assured and students run the risk of over self-absorption and inner focus, as discussed by Schon (1983).

Students' ability to reflect upon their pre-occupations at the commencement of each seminar has developed substantially. The utilisation of case studies has further evidenced an ability to reflect on experiences and emotions alike.

Whilst a long-term study would be desirable initial results from a pilot project indicate that engagement with this model of learning is generating a significantly deeper level of reflection which is apparent in seminars, across the school and in the day-to-day work with the children.

It is too early to identify whether the development of reflective ability is at a surface or deep level. Initial indications from managers would indicate a mix depending on the individual but also on their time within the organisation and their ability to adapt to a model of self-reflection.

The aim of developing a workforce who, like many of our European counterparts, can continuously reflect in order to develop their practice may seem overly-ambitious but it is clear the implementation of our Foundation Degree has had significant benefits for students, resulting in improved practice.

Further benefits to the provider

The collaborative engagement developed by the two organisations has positively impacted across the school with whole school study sessions facilitated by UWE, a joint proposal to the Government for developing a model of reflective supervision in Pupil Referral Units and discussions regarding the development of a post-graduate training course already underway.

The Foundation Degree has attracted an impressive level of interest from other child care providers and the model has been presented to the Children's Workforce Development Council as a proven model to learn from for the future.

Wider implications

The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) has now confirmed that the Government sponsored mode of childcare training, the NVQ, will be abandoned in summer 2010 and be replaced with a more appropriate level three qualification.

The interest in the European model of Social Pedagogy can be valuable but we should not ignore what we already have and what many children are already benefiting from.

If the child care sector is to develop in the way children deserve now is the time to demand that this new qualification is grounded in developing the reflective capacity of workers. The model of work-based learning in conjunction with the Government drive towards Foundation Degree provides a real opportunity to develop our child care workforce into an internationally respected professional body.

With a more reflective workforce, strong relationships between the organisations and an evolving national profile for the course and the school we are in a fortunate position at a time when child care training is looking to change. What remains to be seen is whether as a sector we will look to European models or can make use of what we have already developed in England.

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