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## Graduates' expectations and experience of social care work: Strengths and abilities being nurtured?

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SOCIAL CARE IRELAND



# Graduates' expectations and experiences of social care work - strengths and abilities being nurtured?

Fiona McSweeney

# Aim

- To document the expectations of new social care graduates of the workplace and their initial experiences of the workplace

# Data collection

- Point 1 (end of final year in college)
  - 17 participants
  - Individual semi-structured interviews (view of college programme and placement; readiness for work; expectations of workplace)
- Point 2 (nine to twelve months later)
  - 14 participants
  - Individual semi-structured interviews (initial apprehensions; challenges; support; differences between student and worker; views of college programme)

# Point 2 -profile of participants

- Four full time with a social care organisation
- Two doing internships
- Four doing relief work in multiple agencies
- Two doing agency work
- One working in integrated crèche
- One working in student disability support

# The transition

- Successful transition argued to be fundamental to developing competency (Seah, Mackenzie & Gamble, 2011)
- Described by new social workers as:
  - “a baptism of fire” (Bates et al., 2010, p.152)
  - a “reality shock” (Jack & Donnellan, 2010, p.309)
  - “chaotic” (Tham & Lynch, 2017, p.5)
- Expectations from employers
  - Being able to hit the ground running (Newberry, 2014)

# Expectation of getting work

- Some underestimated the difficulty
  - “I thought I’d walk into a job”
- Felt abandoned by college
  - Need “more emphasis on finding a job. It kind of feels like once you’re out there you [college] go bye”

# Getting work - frustrations

I can't get a job even though I have three years experience. I'm not even getting an acknowledgement, a no letter

Being really sick about residential work that is out there. There is no permanent contracts. There is still zero hour contracts out there

I can see why everywhere want you to have experience. But its very hard when most places advertise work like you have to have two years experience minimum or five years minimum. How am I meant to get it when no one is giving me a chance?



# Employment

That's a bug bear. There are social care workers and care assistants being advertised as same. One's a Level 5 and I've done a Level 8. Why did I bother going back for a Level 8?

I've got issues with my contract. Care assistant rather than social care worker. I am hoping when this register comes in that will change for a lot of people 'cos I think there is a lot of trouble with people who are social care workers and are put on the care assistant scale

I felt they were looking for ways not to hire me. Going through things like [first aid; Children's first]. I don't have it. I only graduated last month. I'll do it. Tell me where to go. I'll go

# But happy to gain experience

I do 26 hours a week with them. It would be 26 contact hours so it involves a lot of driving around. So I could be three hours in one place then two hours in the next place. [...] So its not ideal but its experience building

I've been working non-stop. I started in [name] straight after I left and I was there about three months when I decided to get another job 'cos I was relief. [name] were advertising for relief so I went for that and I got it straight away. Then [name] came up around the same time and they got back to me and they offered me relief panel. Loads of experience and its all different

# Positive anticipations

“Learning new things. There’s stuff you have to learn from getting out there and getting involved and that is something I’m looking forward to”

“Like you are actually seen not as a student any more. Like you are a professional and to be able to actually use your skills and work in an environment that you are accountable”

# Mattering and belonging

“You feel like you are doing stuff. You feel like people will care if you’re not there. Whereas when you’re a student sometimes you just feel like a burden. [...] They’re more open to answering your questions and they will make you feel like less of a burden”

“You feel more part of a team. You feel more in a team role whereas before you’re more so observing”

“You engage more with the clients as a worker than as a student. As a student they might be more passive with you but as a worker they are more eager to interact and engage”

# Enjoying the work

“Just the lads, the staff and everything are great but the most important part is the lads. All the lads are just so lovely. And I love the work that we do. You know you can really see a need for it”

“I do like the work. I like all the people that I work with and the work is really rewarding. It is just the frustration that comes with the lack of support”

“I just do it and I just enjoy it. It is just a good job. It is out there working with people and they appreciate it as well, which is the best thing”

# Fears

“Somebody had told me that they heard autism services that there was a wide amount of challenging behaviour [...] and that just scared the crap out of me”

“That sense of security. [...] It’s gone. All I have now is my work supervisor. So if you don’t have a good relationship there, there is nobody else you can go to”

“Having a negative impact. Just apprehensive of maybe being that one person that can make a difference and you kind of fail”

# Challenges

I'm quite on my own. I was kind of thrown in. Challenging behaviour. I've never worked with anyone like this young fella before. So learning on my feet. A lot of reflection. Not knowing whether I'm doing stuff right or not. Then a lack of support from my boss, which is major

I wouldn't take the piss out of the system and I really found it challenging to stay professional, stay on her side and advocate for her even though I thought she was taking the mick out of the system. So the challenge was in terms of empathy towards somebody and my values on how to treat the system

# Challenges

It's completely different. You have to bring your professionalism into it as well which interferes with who you are. Whereas when you're a student you can just be who you are I think

I would be just getting into the swing of the paperwork. There is a mountain of stuff that I haven't a clue how to do. That was quite challenging for me because I hadn't a clue how to deal with all the stuff



# On the edge

No case file for him off social workers. They have no idea how much I see this child and how much I need to know. His history took me three weeks. [...] I need to know more information about this child. His triggers

I was working there [homeless service] as relief so I was working across 5 or 6 different places. There were people you had to keep introducing yourself to and that gets tiring after a while

He ran out in front of the traffic throwing himself onto the ground kicking the other social care worker. Then his brother went along with it and grabbed me in a headlock and was pulling my hair. [...] So we rang the care manager, no answer. The field care supervisor, no answer

# In danger

“I did a shift there last week in [homeless service]. I got moved there ‘cos they needed someone else. So I come in and it’s a full time staff member doing handovers. She’s like we just kicked out one of the residents. He might come back tonight. He’s violent. Treat him as violent He’s not allowed on the grounds. [...] I was like ‘but you’re staying’ but she said no I’m off at 11. So I asked who is working with me and she said another relief worker. I said to her ‘I don’t know what any of the lads look like’. She was like ‘oh you’ll be grand’. So they put two relief workers, two girls on”

# Reality - leap in responsibility

“If anything happened [on placement] I was told to get into the office and stay there until it is over. And now all of a sudden it is ‘get out on the floor and sort that out’ so I’m like Jesus where is the in-between stage”

“Starting out, going about one-to-ones, groups and you’re never really given the responsibility of that when you are a student. Straight away into it. [...] When you are on the street you’re thinking ‘god if something happens it is all my fault’ [...] but you get used to it”

“You’re all of a sudden accountable for the kids in your care and everything you do is reported. You nearly have to report them sneezing. You’re trying to fit 27 hours into a 24 hour day”

# Responsibility on placement

“It wasn’t too much of a shock. I think it was because of my third year placement because I was given a lot of freedom and a lot of power to make [decisions]. They weren’t checking up on me all the time”

“I felt like in my placement last year and the year before I was given the opportunity to have a lot of responsibility. So that kind of prepared me well for when I came into this job, because you’re literally on your own. So I didn’t find that it was a big jump because I felt like I had got a chance to do that while I was in placement and was supported through it as well”

# Expectations of support

“We have a manager that you ring, a line manager. I am assuming that I’m going to be linking in with the line manager all the time. That is what we were told. If there was an issue arising link in with the line manager”

“I think it is really important for me to find the right organisation. So I feel comfortable that I have an approachable manager or supervisor who offers supervision and it is a policy”

# Realities of support

I've begged for supervision. I've had it once. So I've asked twice and got it once

I would have only supervision in my refuge job. You'd get that once a month and in the meetings people can talk about any issues they have. In the homeless service I never got supervision

# Realities of support

I have a supervisor. So we would have meetings. I think it is supposed to be every eight overnight shifts. Actually I haven't done one yet. [...] Any issues that come up I can always resolve them with the person I'm on shift with

Formal supervision I haven't received any. I think there's a policy and I'm pretty sure its four times a year and it probably should be more than that but the staff team are amazing. Somebody to just talk to about everything

# Questioning practices

“You need to cover your arse in so many ways. In some ways that’s good as it keeps you on your toes. But in other ways it’s like but that’s just covering my ass. That’s not actually meaning I care”

“You start to see how badly run a lot of these services are. [...] I’ve seen the wrong way to do it and I’m looking at them going ‘your monitoring officer is going to have a field day with you’”

“On Saturday at half nine they rang me asked me to do an overnight shift. [...] But you have to be trained in medicine administration [for the case] and I hadn’t got any of that training. They don’t care whether you have the training or not. It is just you hate working there when it goes against everything, like any values that you have”



# Breadth of social care - questioning

They have to be very direct as in if you're trying to challenge addictive behaviours. I wouldn't be comfortable with that [...] because you're learning a certain way to engage with people [...] you talk people through things softly

Some of the residents wouldn't want to engage with the staff or talk about how they're feeling so that could be challenging as well [...] It can be disheartening as a worker when you want to engage with them and access services for whatever issues they may have but they don't want to engage with you

# Theoretical underpinnings

- Point 1

- More than a third spoke of how factual and theoretical knowledge combined to understand social care work - contributed to a frame of mind underpinning practice

- Point 2

- Most spoke of specific theories in relation to current role

# Forgotten theory

“I was thinking of this a few weeks ago because of my role and then I was thinking about it differently today. Because of my role, a few weeks ago I was thinking the only thing I’m applying is the challenging behaviour module. Then today I was thinking ‘ah no it’s all P&P, social policy, child and youth care approach, family law, ecological stuff [...] I could apply absolutely everything. Social psychology, attribution”

“It is easy to forget. Like even asking me about those theories I’m kind of going ‘oh god that feels so long ago”

“I can’t remember. To be honest that’s another reason I want to get out because I feel I’m losing a lot of what I did in college. I feel I’m losing the theory side”

# But reflection

“Reflection yeah. Not really theories. They would tell you to reflect when you are typing up. Like any time something happens you have to write it up. So you have to reflect on how it happened and how it can't happen again. But really I wouldn't find I'd be thinking of theories that much”

“At the time like I was like “Why are they harping on about this [reflection]?” but when you leave and you actually are working you can really see that is where the best learning is done”

# Summary

- Majority doing relief and agency work and appreciating the experience but some frustration
- Doing worthwhile work most motivating
- Being given responsibility on placement seen as the best preparation for work
- Majority not receiving supervision but some seeking and getting support from staff team
- Some effectively working alone and learning by trial and error
- Theoretical underpinning of practice narrowed or not considered but reflection on practice used

# How can the transition be managed?

- Nurturing strengths and abilities of new graduates - join up the jigsaw

