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It ain't what you do it's the way that you do it: the tutor perspective on the impact of the student / tutor alliance on student wellness and the quality of the learning experience in UK counselling training.

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**“It ‘Ain’t What You Do It’s the Way That You Do It:”
The Tutor Perspective on the Impact of the Student /
Tutor Alliance on Student Wellness and the Quality of
the Learning Experience in UK Counselling Training.**

The impact of the 'teaching alliance' in counselling training

- Previous study (student perspective) revealed the importance of tutor/student relationships for students
- Suggested this could have a huge impact on the effectiveness of the training (including student wellness)

Previous research

- Studies showing the importance of certain teacher qualities on learning outcomes (Lowman, 1995; Teven and Hanson, 2004; Benson et al, 2009)
- Fewer studies focusing on trainees in health care professions (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006; Salahuddin, 2000; Jones et al, 2008)

The nature of the course

- Counselling training is not purely an academic discipline
- Application of skills and reflexive abilities
- Personal development, self disclosure
- Can be emotionally demanding

The study

- Focused on the **tutor** perspective:
 - (1) Which tutor qualities and skills tutors thought were particularly important
 - (2) To what extent tutors thought they were able to demonstrate these relational features
 - (3) To what extent, and in what ways, these relationships have an impact on student wellness and the quality of the learning experience

Method

- Counsellor trainers from three HE institutions
- Given questions to consider in advance
- Semi-structured interviews
- Audio recorded

Analysis

Qualitative study

- Small sample
- Rich understanding of data
- Analysis still in progress-reporting from two interviews

Analysis

Template analysis – to identify themes

- Allows flexibility
- Provides a structure without being too rigid
- Enables a priori codes to be used
- Used the same codes as for the previous study to aid comparison

Findings

- Will highlight the similarities and differences between student and tutor perspectives
- Will focus on aspects relating to wellness and a positive learning experience
- Will discuss the possible implications of these findings for counselling training courses

Findings: similarities

- Significant overlap
- Many of the reported tutor qualities and skills were the same
- Likely effects of the relationship on student wellness and learning had many similar features

Which qualities tutors valued highly

Similarities:

Links with the client / therapist relationship

- use of Rogers' (1957) 'core conditions,' (empathy, acceptance, being non-judgmental, genuineness)
- modelling an effective relationship,
- self-disclosure

Which qualities tutors valued highly

Differences:

Self - disclosure

- Tutors highlighted the need for **appropriate** self-disclosure (limits to this)

High self -esteem

- Need to be assertive and robust
- Non-defensive if challenged

Findings : differences

High level of self -awareness

- “acknowledgement of one’s own strengths and weaknesses..management of prejudices and biases.”
- “critically reflecting” on one’s own performance and behaviour.

Perspectives on the learning environment

Similarities:

- **If students felt safe and supported:**
 - (a) Increased participation
 - (b) Increased risk-taking- “feel able to make mistakes”
 - (c) Sense of being held- able to grow

Perspectives on the learning environment

Similarities and differences:

- Need for safe , supportive but **boundaried** learning environment
- “Appropriate balance of support and **challenge**”
- Tutor needs to **lead** the group, take responsibility for learning

“My tendency is to be very democratic...but..you’ve got to have some authority.”

The effects of the relationship on student wellness / affect

Similarities:

- They're **frightened** of being judged, **scared** of the criticism (increased **anxiety**)
- “If you **trust** someone and you feel like they're not going to judge you, you might be able to take feedback from them better as well, or even criticism.”
- “They've got someone **nurturing** there...I'm not talking about like mothering them or something.”
- Students are “**happier**,” “**more comfortable**” and have increased motivation if relationship is positive

The effects of the relationship on wellness /affect

Differences:

- **Possible negative effects on tutor wellness**

Can face **attack** from group members

Stress levels can be high

More difficult if feeling **vulnerable**

“They might have a go at you or they might really target you...we were nearly wiped out emotionally.”

The effects of the relationship on wellness /affect

Differences:

- **External pressures** including increased workload/ reduced resources impact on the alliance and tutor wellness

“When I’m trying to prioritise everything...in that situation the empathy is reduced”

“I want to be patient, I find myself sometimes not being as patient...as I’d like to.”

The effects of the relationship on wellness /affect

Differences:

- Group dynamics/ students in the group can have a negative effect
- (students were) “**frightened** of being judged by people or you felt like people were talking about you behind your back.”

Conclusions

- Too early to draw firm conclusions
- Tutors' views seem to support student perspective in many respects
- More focus on challenge /boundaries
- More focus on managing the learning environment
- Student and tutor wellness seen as inter-dependent (tutor overload, managing own wellness)

Conclusions

Group / Relationship management

- Self- awareness, self- reflection
- Commitment to self- development
- Resilience and robustness
- Non -defensiveness
- Clear boundaries
- Ability to manage / challenge negative behaviours

Implications for training courses

Tutors need to:

- provide a safe, boundaried and sufficiently challenging learning environment using the above relational features
- be skilled at managing groups and relationships, including alliance ruptures
- discuss roles and expectations and other relational issues with students (especially when views differ)

Implications for training courses

Other considerations:

- Rigorous selection procedures for tutors including ability to manage relationships and groups
- Vital importance of on-going personal and professional development

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