"To feel or not to feel? - that is the question"

Evaluating newly qualified social workers' experiences

during their first year in practice.

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" some days are really bad, I'm not going to lie, and some days are good – it's about now trying to get a balance "

How can we promote a more effective use of self for newly qualifying workers?

Connecting to the conference sub theme of 'the use of self in practice and education'.

We will present emerging findings from a one year research study, comparing students' perceptions of social work at the point of qualifying with their views and responses one year later.

"I think organisations need to pay more attention to the health and wellbeing of their social workers. Sickness levels are huge, I've never seen anything like it"

Background and context

- Munro Review of Child Protection (2011); College of Social Work (2011) – Assessed & Supported Year in Employment (ASYE);

- Studies of Newly Qualified Social Workers' (CWDC 2010, Jack & Donellan 2009, Bates et al 2009) have highlighted issues around graduate's experience of support in their employment and detrimental effects on wellbeing and sense of purpose within the profession;

- Faculty small scale research project funding of £1,500;

- Small scale comparative study of the experiences of one group of social work students through a period of transition from completion of the social work degree to completion of one year in practice;

- The study included a focus on the student's perceptions of their emotional coping strategies in practice;

- Expectation that this will inform future programme design

"my idea of social work is helping people, being able to give them one to one, and as a social worker, I don't think you can get that any more"

Research timeline:

- June/July 2012 – Stage One: questionnaire distributed to the 09/09 cohort towards the end of their final year. 22 questionnaires were returned. A key finding of this stage was that there was a high degree of confidence about the transition to qualified practitioner but, for most, this was tempered by high levels of anxiety.

- Of the 22 respondents 16 agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews at the point of graduation (7/16 men).

- Funding used for transcription

- June/July 2013 – Stage Two: 14/16 respondents participated in the follow up semi-structured interviews

- 2013/2014 – Findings analysed and coded- Grounded theory approach using NVIVO 10 for comparative analysis and theory development on going

- July 2014 - Dissemination

Themes from Stage 1 interviews in 2012

Impact of organisational culture: dismay at level of bureaucracy and procedure led practice; minimal contact with service users; struggle to maintain values. High caseloads even for students

"what I think social work is, it's very bureaucratic"; "mountains of paperwork"; "as long as you tick all the boxes and you cover your backside then you are deemed to have done everything possible".

Ethical dilemmas in practice: Recognising impact of austerity and reorganisation; the restrictive application of eligibility criteria; the struggle to maintain values

"being asked to pare down the service to a budget rather than to build up the service to a standard"; "knowing that if they'd just answered the question slightly differently they may have been entitled".

Transition, satisfaction and motivation: Changes in how they feel about the profession

"when I first started out…, I was really excited but actually, what I understand now as a social worker I feel disappointed that it wasn't what I thought I was going to be doing" ; the most enjoyable aspect of social work is when I can actually see that I have facilitated a change in someone's life for the better".

"it's not as hands on... It would be nice that it would be, but the reality of it is, it's not"

Focus on Emotional Resilience - 2012

Acceptance of the challenging and conflictual nature of the work

"thick skinned"; "rolling with the punches"; " mental toughness"

Personal emotional impact: not sleeping; emotional distress; lack of energy; depression: *" I felt really like I'd lost myself, lost my way"*

Different responses to emotional demands:

Procedural approach: focus on task; 'switching off'; focusing on role as an employee; distancing self from emotional responses

"I think you need to have a cut off switch and you need to have a frame of mind where you think… it doesn't really matter and then you just get on with it".

Reflective approach: smaller group demonstrated a more reflective and analytical approach to emotional events *"It's the ability to analyse what's happened and to come back from it, so that you've turned that negative experience into a positive experience";*

Stress management strategies included exercise, meditation, relaxation, time alone, time with family, alcohol.

"I don't internalise it any more, I'm there to do a statutory job as laid out by law and legislation...people may not like it… it's not personal"

Themes from Stage 2 – 2013

Satisfaction: <u>All</u> students expressed satisfaction with choice of career. Some talked of alternate careers in the future ie moving into education

"I don't regret one minute of it, I absolutely love the job"; "its just the most stressful and annoying job in the world"; " it's the best decision I've made, really happy I've made it"

BUT: Organisational culture: Rapidly changing work environment had a big impact - restructuring, changing procedures, project working, frequent movement between teams, impact of flexible working

Some participants identified emerging 'business culture" as challenge to their values. Performance related indicators leading to proceduralism and less reflective practice. *"it's customers now and its very business minded now, trying to reduce budgets and that's kind of been the agenda which conflicts with how I feel"*

Fast tracking/ premature advancement: 3 NQSW respondents described being promoted to Senior posts within first year (often less than 6 months and ...all men!!) *" I'm currently doing grade 5 work and applying for grade five jobs because they know I can do it"*

" you need that team, definitely... and if it's not there, then you're just plugging into a computer and using the phone, that's not going to help"

Themes from Stage 2 – 2013

Transition: Aware of changed expectations – workload, hours, working late, level of responsibility, tiredness, emotional state, emotional impact of casework

Social work identity: challenges to social work values, voluntary sector staff experiencing less conflict with their values - *"I think you've got to be strong and stick to your values and never lose that, don't be scared to challenge"; " I know I'm going to be the one that gets worked into the ground and at the moment I'm so scared of changing as a person"*

Working Relationships: inter professional working described as challenging across contexts

" battling with other people, like health.. They see everything as our role" " I try to work in partnership, even with all this hostility with other professionals"

But also source of support and resilience for some *"being able to keep going, to build resilience by maintaining networks, making networks. No you just could not survive without it"*

"I do wish it was less stressful, I do wish I had less to do, I do wish I was paid more for doing what I do"

Themes 2013 - Sources of support?

Flexible working: identified impact of flexible working arrangements and restructuring of organisations on formal and informal support networks – finding 'like minded' practitioners to work alongside, across teams. Agency workers identified less support from organisation –

everyone is agile so you hardly see anyone but the ones that are there, you know its good to just get a bit of advice"; " agile working has some advantages, it allows you to get the work life balance more in equilibrium.. The downside is that you lose a lot of the team ethos"

Supervision: relationship with team manager identified as central to support . Most described having effective, supportive relationships – available when needed, supportive when unsure or made mistakes, supporting decisions and judgements.

"in one respect you want them to put their arm around you and support and guide you and on the other they need to be very firm and assertive if you're missing deadlines" ; " my manager kind of motivates me, saying look, you've done it"

"people who do care tend to have larger caseloads and be quite stressed"

Focus on Emotional Resilience - 2013

Coping with stress/ distress: participants continued to identify significant levels of distress in their roles. However less evidence of avoiding emotion than one year ago – some acceptance that it is important

"sometimes I have a good cry, and then other days its okay" "at times I have got angry at times I have cried, and sometimes you've just got to go with how you feel and get it out, and then find a way to get past it" "go into the toilet, lock yourself in, scream, cry and then come out again"

Participants aware of impact of stress on others *" one especially who I didn't think would give up, who has been with us and has just given up because they don't like it any more" " I know newly qualified social workers who have gone off on stress and everything like that already"*

Participants have developed range of mechanisms to manage stress and build personal resilience

"ask for help, and if you don't get it in the first place, ask in the next place" **;** *" just talk to them and say- look this really is a problem. And people tend to share their experience and say this is how it worked, don't worry, and they give you that confidence"*

" the next day was a new day and I kicked arse. I did it professionally and it gave me confidence"

Supporting Emotional Resilience 2013

Acknowledging limits: evidence that beginning to set boundaries on working hours, limit home working, leaving work on time – more realistic sense of role.

"when I'm at work, just diary everything, being honest with my manager about what I can and can't do" ; "I need to do the hours I get paid for and do as much as I can in those house and then I need to treat myself to a break"; " I make sure that I take that week and actually do nothing in that time"

Emotional support: managers also seen as major source of emotional support and guidance when distressed, staff aware of organisational supports to combat stress and manage reactions, but concern about how this reflects for some*.*

"I've just had a really crap day and the manager will say to me , come on in, let's have a chat" ;" I've got good support, our manager knows the nature of the job we're doing, that we can, you know, go take half an hour away",

"it was about accepting that as well meaning as I might be, I trained to be a social worker and not a miracle worker"

Supporting Emotional Resilience 2013

Reflective capacity & Belief in Values remain key indicators of resilience

"*another thing is understanding it is a job, but its more than a normal job because its about a person" ; " sometimes I think I set my standards too high ...I'm hoping I don't have to drop my standards" ; " we make mistakes, we learn, we reflect and we go on and we're hopefully better than what we did last time",* *"I think a lot of it is about reflection, being able to reflect on what you have done in that situation... what you could have done better"*

Relaxation: wider range of strategies including socialising with colleagues, with family and friends outside profession, leisure, sport, shopping, alcohol. Less evidence of reliance on organisational supports. *" you've got to relax your brain and our brains are always working non stop"; it's just come naturally, as soon as I get out of that door, as soon as I get home, it's gone, I don't know how I've managed it I just do it"; " they do provide counselling .. But I think it takes a lot to admit that you've got to that point"*

" there's a stress relief workshop and all that stuff... That's not going to help me unless they take half my caseload off me "

Implications for Social Work Education

- How do we prepare students for working within current organisational cultures? Importance of critical reflection in supporting students to evaluate and challenge practice;

- Making sure we discuss the potential conflicts between the value base of social work and the reality of current practice contexts and financial constraints;

- Explore the impact of new, more flexible working practices within agencies and prepare students more effectively for this experience – how to build networks and access support.

- Challenge the widening gap between professional and organisational expectations – working with partners.

- Prepare students for lifelong learning culture and significance of CPD work- with partners around supporting 'fast tracked' staff in their development

- Potential research with partners on supporting emotional wellbeing in practice?

"the conclusion I came to was that no, ... that emotional reaction that you had is part of you ...turning that depth of feeling, that depth of commitment into positive work"

Implications for social work education

- Developing emotional resilience in students – How?
  - Enhance student self awareness through more directed reflection on emotional reactions
  - Utilise range of creative approaches to enhance self and group reflection of emotion – literature, film, art, play.
  - Integrate past students into programme to share experiences of learning to manage stress on the job/ Practitioners to talk about work life balance
  - Balancing the personal with the political – promoting social work values as a means of supporting critical reflection about practice culture and a means of offering constructive challenge to practices.
  - Skill development curriculum – designed with partners to ensure students are tested more realistically
  - Include more conflict management and assertiveness techniques
  - Consider integration of mindfulness and other stress management approaches within the curriculum

"I've been fast tracked through to a senior social worker, they have a recognition of people who need to move forward. I've been fast tracked."