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Evaluation of a 'whole programme' strategy for developing social work students' skills in communication with children and young people

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Evaluation of a 'whole programme' strategy for developing social work students' skills in communication with children and young people

Michelle Lefevre
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JSWEC 2008

Evidence for effective teaching, learning and assessment?

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- General dearth of evidence regarding effectiveness of teaching and assessment methods in SW education (Carpenter, 2005)
- → Outcomes in Social Work Education Project (OSWE), a collaboration between SCIE and SWAP
- Aim: to collect data regarding effectiveness in teaching and assessment methods in qualifying-level social work education and develop robust evaluation tools which can be disseminated

Why measure learning of communication skills with children?

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- Concerns stemming from the findings of the SCIE Knowledge Review on the teaching, learning and assessment of communication skills with children and young people in qualifying level social work education (Luckock, Lefevre & Orr et al, 2006)
  - Practice Survey of how this was taught and assessed across England, Wales and Northern Ireland
  - 2 systematic reviews:
    - *What constitutes effective communication in SW practice*
    - *Effective methods of teaching and assessing such skills.*

Key findings from the Knowledge Review

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- Additional skills needed for working with children
- No firm body of research determining what skills should be taught, learned and assessed on qualifying programmes
- Weak evidence base for *what* should be taught and *how*
- Curriculum content & structures extremely varied
- 'Core qualities and skills sets' can be identified and can inform curriculum content
- Pedagogical methods are posited anecdotally or theoretically but lack hard evidence on their effectiveness

'Key qualities and skill sets' are not just about 'doing' communication but about wider knowledge and qualities in the student

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a) Values, ethical commitments,
b) emotional capacity, personal qualities

Micro-skills, methods & techniques

Underpinning knowledge & understanding

Some implications for curriculum development

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- A basic level of specialist skill in communication with children is needed for generic qualification so learning these cannot be left to chance or preference – but what's the best way? (Luckock, Lefevre & Tanner, 2007).
- Varied set of qualities and capabilities can't just be taught through focused communication skills teaching but needs a whole programme approach – who oversees this? (Lefevre et al, 2008)
- Implications for what previous experiences students have & personal qualities/capacities student shows in potentia at admissions?
- Importance of evaluating the effectiveness of particular pedagogical approaches
- Interface with practice learning – availability of experiences

Example: Where might students learn about child-centred communication across the programme (1)?

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- 'Knowing': Understanding how to pitch communicative style to children's age and stage of development
  - Modules such as 'human growth and social relationships'
  - Impact on children of adverse experiences in teaching on child protection
  - Experiential learning from real children
    - Placement, personal life, previous exp., child observation
  - Embedded through reflective opportunities
  - But forms of knowledge are contested…

Where might students learn about child-centred communication across the programme (2)?

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- 'Being' (a): The underpinning ethics and values of child-centred communication - Importance of commitment to children's participation and recognition of children as marginalised/excluded (Hegar 1989)
  - Experiential roleplay methods to enable students to understand, empathize and engage actively with this experience
  - Involve them directly in the teaching and learning process as with adult service users/carers - models the ethos of participation
  - Problem-based learning modelling empowerment
  - Some congruity between content and method, i.e. that the *methods* of teaching should *model* the approach itself - 'the matching principle' (Ward, 1995)

Where might students learn about child-centred communication across the programme (3)?

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- Being (b) – The personal qualities and emotional capacities which promote this - 'use of self ' (psychosocial emphasis)
  - Screening at admissions for students who aren't warm, friendly, empathic, caring, playful?
  - Offer appropriate opportunities for these qualities to be developed on programme and in practice learning
    - Reflective logs, child observation, group tutorials, doing own genograms, role plays, supervision
    - Pastoral support for unresolved emotional issues
  - Should social work educators should themselves possess these personal qualities and model them in their teaching and assessment?

Where might students learn about child-centred communication across the programme (4)?

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- 'Doing' – techniques, methods, micro-skills, e.g. going at child's pace, using play, concepts, language
  - Theoretical teaching and learning
  - Demonstrations by tutor, PA or video
  - Skills labs using role plays or real children
  - Supervised practice learning (observed or videoed)
  - Doing their own creative, artistic, play based work

Evaluating this aspect of the Sussex curriculum

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Evaluation Question:

To what extent, and in what ways, does the MA in Social Work Programme at Sussex contribute to social work students' development of confidence and competence (core qualities and skill sets) in communicating with children and young people?

- Collecting data at 4 points – prospective
- Aims to uncover which aspects of the programme have had what effects
- Doesn't assume no skill at the beginning but looks at individual and collective journeys to skilled and confident practice

Method

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- *Initial Questionnaire*: Collection of students' *personal characteristics* which would allow for analysis on the basis of their profile, i.e. have particular kinds of student learned most/least?
- *Confidence* in communication with children rated by students at different stages and mapped to profile.
- *Subjective* student feedback on the aspects of the programme they perceived to facilitate their confidence and skills with children and on the focused skills teaching
- *Case vignette* - more '*objective'* measure of students' increase in knowledge about constituents of effective communication - (though analysis is subjective….)

Methodological issues

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- Student time – justifiable? A learning tool too…
- Dilemmas of questionnaire fatigue – does modifying vignette each time affect validity?
- Standardising questions aids analysis but suggests answers (informed by previous pilot)
- Mapping development of knowledge and skills of individuals over time – not all have completed all 4
- Resource issues re. analysing data, but a rich source and lots still to analyse!

Key findings (1)

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Students' participation in this programme has led to increased *confidence* in communicating with children and young people

SCALE		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
% SCORING	T1			4	12	12	4	16	28	20	4	
	T2				4	19	15	8	42	11.5		
	T3				17	6		17	33	22	17	
	T4							14	27	36	23	

Findings (2): The focused teaching on skills with children was felt to be useful

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Exercise/teaching strategy	% citing this	% citing this in top 5	Mean for importance
Contributions from student colleagues in the group	100%	92%	3.75
Direct teaching input	85%	54%	2.9
Discussion on relationships	85%	54%	2.7
Case study exercise	77%	69%	2.2
Tutor style (e.g. Modelling, managing group process and discussions)	77%	54%	3.3
Experiential exercise reflecting on what was learned in professional experience	62%	38%	2.6
Experiential exercise role playing being a child	54%	38%	3.2
Role-play exercise regarding a child client	54%	46%	2.8
Research findings presentation	46%	8%	2
Any other feature - please specify:	0	0	

Findings (3) Perceived most important elements which enhanced the students' learning

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Most important elements which enhanced the students' learning	% citing this n= 22	% citing this in top 5 N=17	Mean score for impor-tance
Direct practice with children and young people in placement	91%	94%	1.7
Course teaching on child development	82%	53%	3.1
Sub-module on communication skills with children and young people	68%	59%	3.9
Pre-course professional experience with children	68%	59%	2.5
Other personal experience with children	64%	53%	3.2
Input from practice assessor/on-site supervisor	55%	47%	3.1

Those key qualities, knowledge & skills about which students demonstrated MOST knowledge at T4

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Posi-tion	Those aspects about which students demonstrated most knowledge at T4	% OF STUDENTS DEMONSTRATING KNOWLEDGE
1*	Knowledge about child development	95%
1*	Understanding of the purpose of communication in context	95%
1*	Knowledge of appropriate models, approaches, methods and skills in work with children	95%
1*	Child-centred communication	95%
1*	Use of play, symbolic, creative, non-verbal and expressive techniques	95%
6*	Interviewing techniques	91%
6*	Ability to recognise and use one's own feelings (and counter-transference) in the work	91%
6*	Being able to work with depth processes in the work not just surface ones	91%
9*	Knowledge of how (adverse) experiences affect children	86%
9*	Actions to promote children feeling trust and safety	86%
11	Eliciting and taking into account children's views & concerns	81%

Aspects of Knowledge which increased the most during the programme (shown by vignette) – in all 3 domains

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Interviewing techniques	↑71%
Being able to work with depth processes in the work not just surface ones	↑63%
Feeling comfortable to work with children's strong feelings	↑48%
How inherited traits, capabilities or impairments affect child's communication	↑41%
Being able to use a variety of tools (e.g. ecomaps)	↑39%
Providing information and explanations	↑25%
Child-centred communication	↑19%
Being playful	↑18%

Those which students demonstrated LEAST knowledge about at T4 – WHY?

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22*	AOP – non-judgemental attitude	27%
22*	Open and honest	27%
22*	Going at the child's pace	27%
25*	Being playful	18%
25*	Considering issues of confidentiality	18%
27*	Being sincere, genuine, congruent	14%
27*	Reliable & consistent	14%
27*	Providing uninterrupted time	14%
30*	An ethical stance that children are competent and have a right to participate	9%
30*	Respectful,	9%
32*	AOP – race/ethnicity/culture	0
32*	AOP - gender	0

Why was less knowledge shown at T4 about some aspects?

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AOP – non-judgemental attitude	↓45%
Respectful,	↓27%
Considering issues of confidentiality	↓26%
Open and honest	↓17%
Listening	↓16%
Understanding of how the social work role and task impacts upon communication	↓15%
Eliciting and taking into account children's views & concerns	↓15%
Understanding of the purpose of communication in context	↓5%
Going at the child's pace	↓5%
Actions to promote children feeling trust and safety	↓2%
Knowledge of appropriate models, approaches, methods and skills in work with children	↓1%

Some Implications

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- Practice learning opportunities with children essential (more important than involving live children in teaching?)
- Pre-course, paid work experience and personal contact with children to be encouraged (prior to programme?)
- Not all students will respond well to every learning method so variety important
- Integrative perspectives:
- Importance of more knowledge of effectiveness
- Consideration re validity of tool

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