Becoming effective communicators with children: developing practitioner capability through social work education

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Abstract

Social workers employed within statutory settings in countries such as the UK are subject to legal and policy requirements to communicate directly and effectively with children and young people. Qualifying social work education is expected to prepare students so that they can practice competently. However, in England at least, practice and education are both falling short. While active attention is now being given to ways of facilitating improvements in practice, almost nothing is known about how qualifying courses might best promote student learning. This paper reports some of the findings from a UK-based empirical study into factors and processes which support students in developing the self-efficacy and 'applied understanding' they need to undertake effective direct work with children.   A superficial focus on the 'doing' of communication (techniques and skills) appears to be inadequate: courses must additionally provide a range of experiential, participatory, didactic and critically reflective learning opportunities which can enable deep learning of the underpinning knowledges, ethical commitments and personal qualities also needed. A model is presented of an integrated and coherent learning sequence which could be used by programmes to ensure students develop the necessary generic, child-centred and 'applied child-specialist' capabilities in communication with children.

Keywords

Introduction

Enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's right to participation in matters which concern them should no longer be in question. Legislation and social policy embedding these universal rights has come to shape social work practice in numerous countries over recent decades. Across the UK, for example, social workers are required to inform, involve and consult with children who are in care, in need or at risk (see, for example, Department of Health *et al*, 2000; Scottish Government, 2010; Welsh Assembly Government, 2011). Participatory research has enabled children in such circumstances to voice how they want practitioners to work with them; for example, their preference for child-centred and relationship-based approaches which facilitate exploration of sensitive and complex issues (Winter, 2009; McLeod, 2010).

However, there is evidence from a number of countries that social workers' direct practice falls short of the standard children expect and deserve (Clare and Mevik, 2008). This not only transgresses children's rights, but can adversely affect them in a range of ways. In England, Serious Case Reviews frequently suggest that children might have been better protected where the professionals involved with them had spent more time finding out what they were thinking and feeling (Ofsted, 2011).   Family assessments of risk and need tend to be dominated by parents' views and concerns, with the result that children often feel that their views and perspectives have been sidelined, misrepresented, or distorted (Horwath, 2010). Not only does this mean that professionals do not always gather a full picture of the situation, but children can be left feeling confused, disengaged and uncared for (Cossar *et al*, 2011). Children in care have been particularly vocal about poor practice, with some describing how their social workers do not always make the effort to see them alone nor build the kinds of relationships with them that convey that they matter as individuals (Morgan, 2011).

At least some of the reasons for poor practice are likely to be contextual. Social workers in England have complained about administratively-focused workforce targets, over-burdensome caseloads and proceduralised supervision (Broadhurst *et al*, 2010). These constraints rarely leave space for the creative planning, relationship-building, reflection and emotional processing needed to enable social workers to intervene empathically and authoritatively with children who are traumatised, angry, frightened or bewildered (Ferguson, 2011). A recent Government-commissioned review of child protection by Professor Eileen Munro has validated practitioners' complaints about the lack of time and support for direct work with children and proposed a raft of recommendations for systemic change to promote a more child-centred system (Munro, 2011). These recommendations were broadly accepted by government; recommendations for higher quality supervision and a reduction in bureaucracy are already being enacted at the time of writing.

While the kind of full-system reform proposed by Munro for England is likely to be limited by retrenchment due to the current economic recession, it seems certain that social workers will be expected to do more not less direct work with children and their families in the future. However, after years of the importance of such work having been devalued, it is not surprising that many social workers currently feel insufficiently confident in their skills. Qualifying courses are now faced with determining how they should best prepare students for this developing role.

The role of social work education

Uncertainty has been noted in countries as diverse as North America (Mullin and Canning, 2006), Australia and Norway (Clare and Mevik, 2008) about how to organise the structure and content of qualifying social work programmes so that they prepare students for effective direct work with children. This lack of consensus has been particularly notable within the UK. Two surveys of qualifying programmes, one including the four countries of the UK (Luckock *et al*, 2006) and another just within Wales (Taylor and

Boushel, 2009), uncovered a wide variation in teaching content, pedagogical strategies and opportunities for direct contact with children within practice placements. There was even a lack of agreement about whether and to what extent this more specialist aspect of social work capability should be included within a generic curriculum.

This is likely to stem, at least in part, from the limited evidence base regarding how best to teach this area of the curriculum. An earlier Knowledge Review conducted with colleagues for the Social Care Institute for Excellence had made it possible to determine the core practitioner capabilities which enhance communication between children and their social workers (Luckock *et al*, 2006). These were subsequently categorised into a taxonomy of 32 dimensions within domains of *Knowing* (underpinning understanding of children and what affects their communication), *Doing* (skills, methods and techniques for practice), and *Being* (use of self, encompassing (i) ethical commitments/values and (ii) personal qualities and emotional capacity (Lefevre *et al*, 2008)). This categorisation is detailed in Figure 1 later in the paper. It is proposed that social workers need to become competent in all of these 'Communicative Capabilities with Children' (CCWC) if they are to be able to engage, interact and converse effectively with children across the range of social work roles and tasks. The diversity and spread of the CCWC dimensions signal that they could not be learned within a single module; they would require developmental opportunities across a programme of study, including within practice placements.

There is, however, limited knowledge as to which teaching methods and learning opportunities might best facilitate students' development of these CCWC. The practice survey and systematic review included within the aforementioned Knowledge Review did enable the most common pedagogic approaches to be identified. The first of these ('skills acquisition') focuses on ways in which students might acquire the communication methods and techniques encompassed by the *Doing* domain of the CCWC taxonomy. Generic proficiencies, such as empathy, openness and listening skills, are most commonly covered by

qualifying programmes. These are taught primarily through workshops and 'skills-labs', often using role

play with adults (Moss *et al*, 2007; Koprowska, 2010) or 'simulated' children (Pope, 2002). The second set

of approaches utilises advocacy or problem-based learning strategies to enable students to connect with

children's structural experiences of oppression and to develop empowerment-based philosophies and

methods (see, for example, Smith and Bush, 2001). These approaches are in line with the ethical

commitments associated with the *Being(i)* domain of the CCWC taxonomy. The third uses experiential

and interactive methods to build the emotional capacity and use of self associated with *Being(ii)*.

Psychosocial approaches such as child observation (Briggs, 1992), reflective groupwork and tutor

modelling (Ward, 2008) are employed to provide a 'containing' and attuned reflective space within which

students can engage with the emotional realm. It is believed that, by having a safe space to think about

the internal worlds of both themselves and children, students' emotional awareness and capacity to

engage will be enhanced (Urdang, 2010).

The pedagogical approaches associated with *Being* and *Doing* share the experiential learning philosophy

that "social work students cannot develop empathy, emotional regulation and attentive listening skills by

reading a book" (Napoli and Bonifas, 2011, p.646). However, a 'naively inadequate' philosophy of 'train

and hope' (Dickson and Bamford, 1995, p.102) seems to pertain overall. It is unclear as to whether these

methods ensure deep learning (Carpenter, 2011), whereby techniques and behaviours practised in the

classroom are able to be drawn on at a later stage in the professional context with real children. Deep

learning seems to be best supported where students are required to establish their own initial learning

goals and action plans and when techniques taught are subsequently reinforced by supervision and 'recall'

training (Mitchell *et al*, 1989; Gleeson, 1992). Kolb's (1984) learning cycle would seem to suggest that

such forms of experiential learning might be deepened by opportunities for students to reflect critically

on concrete experiences of communication with real children, which might have taken place prior to social

work training either in work-based or personal contexts. This 'learning from experience' approach could

enable students to identify constituents of effective communication and relate them to the theoretical context before subjecting them to further experimentation in placement. Methods with some measure of success in achieving this include tutor-led reflective seminars, fieldwork supervision and feedback on observed practice, which are explicitly underpinned by theory and research (Pope, 2002; Horwath and Thurlow, 2004; Mullin and Canning, 2007).

There is insufficient understanding, too, of how pedagogical methods such as these interact with student-centred factors. Students do not come to social work training as blank slates: their levels of initial competence are heterogeneous for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there is little consistency in admissions requirements cross-nationally in respect of previous experience and academic ability. Secondly, students within a particular programme vary widely in respect of their prior experience with children, which is likely to affect their initial capability and confidence in engagement and communication. Thirdly, opportunities for experimentation with newly-learned techniques in placement settings cannot be relied upon: in the UK there is no guarantee that, at the point of qualification, a student will have had the opportunity to work directly with a child (Luckock *et al*, 2006). Fourthly, students' motivation for developing direct work skills varies, influenced by future aspirations for employment in children's services settings. Any or all of such factors may affect the trajectory of students' learning and development. Such a diverse set of premises has made it particularly difficult for educators to determine how best to prepare their students for practice. More needs to be known about the learning and development process of different kinds of student in relation to this topic.

This paper now moves to consider some of the findings of recent research by this author which enable some of the concerns posed so far to be considered. That study has been published in its entirety elsewhere (Lefevre, 2012), so this paper will provide only a brief account of the methodology before discussing some of the findings which shed light on the topics under discussion here.

Methodology

The research question for the study was, 'What factors and processes might support qualifying social work students in learning to become effective communicators with children?'. A realist evaluation approach (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) framed exploration of trajectories for increased/decreased self-efficacy and capability in relation to students' characteristics, motivations and experiences. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a cohort of 28 students who undertook a full-time, 21-month qualifying Masters programme in social work in a university in the south of England. As sole investigator, I was an insider researcher, known to the students as a year tutor and as the teacher of three sessions on communication with children.

Ethical approval was obtained for the research through the university's ethical clearance process and standard ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were followed. In addition, my insider position meant it was important to ensure that the students did not feel coerced into participating or received the impression that I was interested only in certain types of response. Following Drake (2010), I strove to operate transparently and reflexively to ensure that any risk of bias, subjectivity and undue or hidden influence was surfaced and explored.

This was a longitudinal study, based on a pretest posttest design. Table 1 indicates the five time points (T1-T5) at which data were collected. Students were subject to a number of learning interventions during the programme, so measures were taken at key points. T1 (the first time point) was at the point of entry to the programme. T2 data were collected just prior to three sessions taught by me which focused on developing students' skills in communicating and engaging with children (using the CCWC as a guide). The sessions lasted 2.5 hours each and took place over three Fridays in the second term of the programme. Content included presentations and discussions of key principles for practice, underpinned by ethical debate, theory and research, and role play exercises enabling the development of use of self and practice

of methods and techniques. A full outline of the curriculum content can be found in Lefevre (2012). T3 data were collected just after the three taught sessions which are considered to be the primary learning intervention during the T2- T3 time period (over those three weeks students also undertook twelve days in their fieldwork practice placement, but this constituted just 6% of the 200 placement days undertaken within the programme and only around half of the students were in a placement offering direct contact with children during that period). T4 data were collected at the end of the programme. T5 interviews were conducted approximately 18 months after the students had completed the programme.

Table 1   Students providing data at each time point

Time points for data collection		Methods	N° providing data	% of cohort n=28
T1	Beginning of the programme	Questionnaires	25	89%
T2	Just before the focused sessions on communication with children	Questionnaires	27	96%
T3	Just after the focused sessions on communication with children	Questionnaires	18	64%
T4	The end of the programme	Questionnaires	22	79%
T5	18 months into qualified practice	Interviews	5	18%

Table 1 also indicates how many students participated at each time point. Although all 28 students agreed to participate in the first four time points, the proportion of the cohort providing data at each point varied because students only provided data if they were in class on the day the data were collected. Participants' age, gender, ethnicity, future working intentions, and pre-course personal and/or work-based experience with children were collected at T1. Each student was assigned a unique identifying number so that responses through the time points could be tracked and compared over time.   The majority of the students were female, white British, aged under 37 and without a disability.

Questionnaires were used at the first four time points and interviews at the fifth. Two key variables were measured in the T1-T4 questionnaires, which I have termed self-efficacy and 'applied understanding'.

Self-efficacy was measured by students rating on a 0-10 scale their level of confidence in being able to communicate effectively with children at that moment in time: 0 was used to indicate 'no confidence' and 10 'very confident'. Such self-ratings of confidence are a common measure of evaluating self-efficacy in social work education (see, for example, Quinney and Parker, 2010; Koprowska, 2010). While self-perceptions are not enough to guarantee proficiency in direct practice, self-efficacy scales are believed to indicate individuals' "confidence in their ability to execute specific skills in a particular set of circumstances and thereby achieve a successful outcome" (Holden *et al.*, 2002, p. 116).

Measuring students' actual competence in direct practice with children was not practicable given the diversity and variability of practice learning opportunities, so 'applied understanding' was selected as an alternative method of gaining insight into their capability. Analysis of participants' responses to case vignettes of typical practice scenarios was selected as this method has been found to offer a reasonable approximation of professionals' likely responses in a real situation (MacIntyre and Green Lister, 2010). The vignette responses provide some indication of students' capacity to draw on their understanding of children, the social work role and communication methods and apply such understanding to a practice situation.

Following this method, participants were asked to provide written responses to questions about a hypothetical situation in which a social worker needed to communicate (a) with a younger child aged 5-7 and (b) with a teenager. The questions inquired into students' understanding of the purpose of the communication in that situation, their subjective responses to the children's situation and their role with them, and the approaches they felt would be most useful to achieve their aims. Full details of the vignettes and questions are provided in Lefevre (2012). The vignette was administered at the first four time points (T1-4) and was amended slightly each time, with identifying details such as name or context changed but key parameters, such as issues relating to anti-oppressive practice, safeguarding and welfare

were held constant. This enabled comparable, standardised data to be elicited, so that the internal validity of the study could be enhanced without triggering 'scenario fatigue/boredom' (Poulou, 2001). The questions asked in relation to these vignettes offered the potential for all dimensions of the CCWC taxonomy to be demonstrated.

The content of participants' vignette responses was then analysed thematically to see for which of the 32 dimensions of the taxonomy students could demonstrate their applied understanding. On the basis of this, every student was given a score for 'applied understanding of the CCWC' at each time point, which represented the total number of dimensions they had evidenced in their vignette response.

Two-tailed matched pair t-tests were conducted using SPSS v17 to examine whether changes in self-efficacy ratings and scores for applied understanding were statistically significant. Variations in the number of students evidencing each of the taxonomy dimensions at the four time points were also analysed (see Figure 1).

Additional data on students' perceptions were gathered at T3 and T4. Participants were asked to score the extent to which pre-course experiences and programme-related learning opportunities had facilitated their learning and development and to provide further qualitative comments on their views. They were also asked how many placements they had had offering direct practice learning opportunities with children and whether/why their intentions for working with children in the future had changed.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with five participants approximately eighteen months after they had completed the programme (T5). Only those working post-qualification in children's services settings were approached for interview. The interview format was semi-structured, beginning with open questions about the interviewees' perceptions of their learning journeys and moving to more focused inquiries into specific factors and processes which had helped them feel more confident and capable. Interviewees

were provided with their T1-T4 data to facilitate their reflections. The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and coded using Nvivo v8. Case analyses of the interviewees' whole trajectories of learning and development were also completed, incorporating data from all five time points. Interviewees were asked to verify their transcripts and to provide feedback on the data analysis.

A full exposition of the thematic and case analyses are available in Lefevre (2012). Selected findings are now presented and discussed with reference to the concerns about the development of the qualifying curriculum which were raised earlier.

The development of students' self-efficacy and applied understanding

The results of the two-tailed matched pair T-tests are provided in Tables 2 and 3. These show that, between the beginning (T1) and end of the programme (T4), statistically significant increases occurred in both students' self-efficacy and applied understanding of the CCWC (N.B. significant changes are shown in bold type). The timing of these increases was different for each measure.

Table 2 Students' understanding of the CCWC

Paired comparison	Time point	Mean	Std. Deviation	For pair, N=	Std. Deviation for pair	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed) p=
T1&T4	T1	16.05	3.118	19	3.649	-3.269	18	**.004**
	T4	18.79	3.047					
T2 & T3	T2	14.94	5.414	17	4.683	-3.470	16	**.003**
	T3	18.88	3.160					
T1& T2	T1	16.08	2.888	24	3.647	1.959	23	.062
	T2	14.63	5.199					
T2 & T4	T2	15.10	5.098	21	5.137	-3.356	20	**.003**
	T4	18.86	2.726					
T3 & T4	T3	18.93	2.921	14	3.251	.493	13	.630
	T4	18.50	3.082					

Students' levels of applied understanding rose most between T2 and T3, the three week time period during which the three sessions on communication with children were the primary learning intervention.

Table 3   Students' perceptions of self-efficacy in relation to communicating with children

Paired comparison	Time point	Mean	Std. Deviation	For pair, N=	Std. Deviation for pair	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed) p=
T1&T2	T1	5.83	1.922	23	1.492	-.140	22	.890
	T2	5.87	1.546					
T1 & T3	T1	5.82	2.215	17	1.460	-1.163	16	.262
	T3	6.24	1.888					
T1& T4	T1	6.11	1.997	19	1.926	-3.336	18	**.004**
	T4	7.58	1.017					
T2 & T3	T2	5.93	1.624	15	1.727	-.299	14	.769
	T3	6.07	1.944					
T2& T4	T2	5.90	1.518	20	1.268	-6.525	19	**.000**
	T4	7.75	.967					
T3 & T4	T3	6.64	1.737	14	1.460	-2.929	13	**.012**
	T4	7.79	1.051					

Self-efficacy, by contrast, rose hardly at all over between T2-T3, but did increase significantly between T3-T4 (the fourteen months subsequent to the three sessions). This finding suggests that, although the skills teaching enhanced students' applied understanding, they needed teaching and learning opportunities throughout the programme, including the majority of the 200 practice learning days, in order to feel more confident in their capacity to commmunicate effectively with children.

No trends were apparent regarding age, gender or ethnicity but this may have been masked by the small sample and variability in who participated at each time point.

Data collected at T3 and T4 indicated that two-thirds of participants believed pre-course personal and work-based experience with children had substantially influenced their learning (see Table 4 below). It

appeared to play an important but complex role in developing their self-efficacy and applied understanding at the first two time points (i.e. prior to either fieldwork placements or the three sessions on communication with children). The students with highest perceptions of self-efficacy at T1 and T2 tended to be those who had had the most experience with children prior to the programme, either in work-based settings or in their personal lives. Of this group, participants who had had both work-based and personal experience also tended to have higher applied understanding scores at those time points. It could be suggested that the confidence of these students in their abilities was justified, as it was underpinned by both a conceptual understanding of good practice and embodied experience of real communication with children.

Elevated confidence did not necessarily match with high CCWC scores, however: at T1 and T2 almost a fifth of the sample had high self-efficacy ratings but low scores for applied understanding. It was possible that these five students were unjustifiably over-confident in their abilities. One of the interviewees who had this profile, 'Ben', offered an alternative explanation. Ben described how he had developed competence in direct work with young people through his job in a youth work setting prior to the programme. This was not just a self-perception: he had received feedback from supervisors, colleagues and young people themselves which attested to his skills and personal qualities. However, he did not have, at T1 and T2, a conceptual understanding of what effectiveness in social work communication meant in respect of theory, ethics or research findings; consequently, he scored low for applied understanding at T1 and T2. His improved score at T4 indicated, he thought, his capacity to integrate theory and practice in a way which was necessary to meet the complex challenges of communication within the social work role.

In line with these findings, students without any pre-course experience with children tended to have much lower self-efficacy ratings at the first three time points. This was the case even for those who

demonstrated quite high levels of applied understanding, such as interviewee 'Sarah'. Sarah scored herself as 3/10 for confidence at the first three time points (substantially lower than the cohort mean of around 6) but gained one of the highest applied understanding scores. It is, of course, the role of social work education to prepare students so that they have adequate knowledge and skills and realistic levels of self-confidence for practice. Unjustified over-confidence would be worrying as it might mean students were less aware of gaps in their capability. However, very low levels of self-efficacy early in the programme are not without problem as they can be detrimental to learning. Sarah, for example, felt 'incredibly daunted' about encountering children, despite her ten years experience in adult social care prior to the course and it required much courage and tenacity on her part to undertake direct work with children in placement. Providing opportunities for all students to audit pre-existing expertise early in a programme and exploring the transferability of generalist and generic capabilities may help both under- and over-confident students to gain a more realistic appreciation of both their strengths and learning needs and to build self-efficacy through recognising the transferability of existing capability.

While the mean applied understanding score for the cohort remained buoyant at T4, the scores of some individuals flat-lined or even decreased at T4. The research by Mitchell *et al* (1989) and Gleeson (1992) cited earlier suggests that such students might benefit from 'recall' teaching and supervision with a specific focus on earlier learning to embed their learning and render it transferable to the practice context.

Figure 1 The proportion of students evidencing each taxonomy dimension %

Domain	Dimension	T1	T2	T3	T4
Domain of Doing: Proficient in.....	Using a variety of tools (e.g. ecomaps)	20	39	59	
	Interviewing techniques	20	48	55.5	27
	Listening	60	81.5	78	68
	Play, symbolic, and creative techniques	84	63	89	100
	Going at the child's pace	32	33	39	45.5
	Child-centred communication	80	67	94.5	100
Domain of Being(ii): Personal qualities and emotional capacities	Work with depth processes	28	28	91	
	Engage and build relationships	68	63	94.5	77
	Build trust and safety	88	89	89	91
	Be playful and creative	12	37	72	32
	Comfortable with strong feelings	16	12	8	68
	Be caring and demonstrate concern	44	55.5	67	45.5
	Be empathic	40	59	61	50
	Be open and honest	52	33	44.5	32
	Be sincere, genuine, congruent		33	18	
	Human, warm, friendlys, humourous, enthusiastic	28	44.5	44.5	36
	Recognise, manage and use own feelings	80	81.5	89	95.5
Domain of Being(i): An ethical commitment to.....	Eliciting children's views and concerns	96	85	94.5	86
	Providing information and explanations	52	41	67	77
	Maintaining confidentiality where possible	44	15	50	18
	Providing uninterrupted time	22	17	4	
	Reliability and consistency	8	37	11	18
	Respectfulness	36	37	17	18
	Anti-oppressive practice	60	26	28	36
	Non-judgementalism	72	48	17	32
	Children's competence and right to participate	11	9		
Domain of Knowing: Understanding about.....	Effective models, approaches and methods	96	52	78	100
	How the social work role affects communication	88	70	100	77
	The purpose of communication in context	60	81.5	94.5	100
	How (adverse) experiences affect communication	72	63	83	91
	How children's capabilities and traits affect their comm	15	72	45.5	
	Child development	84	52	83	100

0 50 100 150 200 250 300 350 400

■ % Students evidencing dimension at T1 N=25 ■ % Students evidencing dimension at T2 n=27
■ % Students evidencing dimension at T3 n=18 ■ % Students evidencing dimension at T4 n=22

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Student learning about the CCWC at each time point

Figure 1 provides a tabulation of the proportion of participants who demonstrated applied understanding of each CCWC dimension at the first four time points.   It can be seen that most dimensions of the CCWC taxonomy were evidenced by at least some participants at T1 and one half of them were evidenced by at least half of the cohort. This indicates good levels of applied understanding at entry. On being shown this table, the interviewees suggested that the robust initial scores might relate to the programme requirement for applicants to have at least six months experience in social care or a related field, which offers a rich source of prior experiential learning.

Figure 1 also reveals that dimensions in the domains of *Knowing*, *Doing* and *Being(ii)* (personal qualities/emotional capacity) were evidenced in many more students' vignette responses at T3 compared with T2, and that there were further increases across these domains of capability at T4. A rather concerning picture emerged, however, regarding the sub-domain of *Being(i)* (ethical commitments/ values): Figure 1 shows that cohort mean scores for *Being(i)* dimensions were lower at T4 than T1. One possible interpretation of this pattern is that values and ethics which had perhaps motivated students to enter the profession had been forgotten or were seen as less important by the end of the programme. The interviewees, however, challenged this hypothesis suggesting that, instead, these values had become part of their tacit professional knowledge, being drawn on at an intuitive rather than solely a deliberative level (Eraut, 1994):

> *[Amanda-T5] I guess by the end, you know, particularly respect and non judgemental attitude, it's so intrinsic to the whole course that maybe take it as given that that's, you know, you don't need to write again, that I'll treat, you know, have a non- judgemental approach to this.*

This is not ideal, however, as assumptions and qualities less accessible to conscious recall are also less available for critical scrutiny (Fook *et al,* 2000).   Generally the students' discourse in their vignette

responses and interviews was much more about care, protection, emotions and engagement (associated with *Being(ii)*) than ethical commitments to rights, power or anti-oppressive practice (categorised within *Being(i)*). Without a larger sample, significance tests and a control group it is difficult to know whether this is simply an artefact of this sample. However, research elsewhere does indicate a workplace culture more concerned with children's care and protection than with their rights or voice (Oliver, 2010; Morgan, 2011) and it may be that such values require emphasis within qualifying education so that students are equipped to integrate both philosophies in their practice.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that many of the CCWC dimensions evidenced within students' T1, T3 and T4 responses were less apparent at T2. This was suggestive of a 'shaking up' of students' pre-existing knowledge, beliefs and perceptions at T2. For some of the students this coincided with a dip in their sense of self-efficacy. The interviewees suggested that this was because students were beginning to recognise how communication within the social work role required specialist knowledge, qualities and skills additional to those generic and child-focused capabilities deployed in non-qualified settings (child-focused' is here defined as the more generalist proficiencies which would be needed for communication with children by practitioners from a range of disciplines, not just social work, such as how to engage, play and talk with children):

> *[Melody-T5] I felt possibly like it was this big thing that we have to do and, although we do it all the time, but … almost the more you learn possibly, for a while, the more deskilled you feel. You don't know about the world of communicating in various ways with children prior to doing the course and then, when it's opened up to you, you feel a little bit deskilled finding your feet, before you start to consolidate that learning.*

The most influential learning experiences

Students were asked at both T3 and T4 to rate the experiences which had most enabled them to develop confidence and effectiveness in communicating with children (see Table 4). All those presented as options were cited by a least one quarter of the cohort. Preferences were expressed for a range of experiences and pedagogic interventions; this may reflect diversity in learning styles but is also likely to relate to how a variety of approaches are needed to develop knowledge, skills, values and personal qualities.

Table 4   Students' opinions on what had most benefited their learning

	T3 % citing this (n=12)	In top 5 for importance at T3 (n=12)	T4 % citing this (n=22)	In top 5 for importance at T4 % (n=17)
Direct practice with children and young people in placement	75	58	91	94
Course teaching on child development	100	91	82	53
Focused sessions on communication with children	100	75	68	59
Pre-course professional experience with children	67	50	68	59
Personal experience with children (non-parental)	67	33	64	53
Input from practice assessor/supervisor	50	25	55	47
Modelling via the tutorial approach	50	17	41	41
Guided reading from tutor	75	42	41	12
General reading	25	0	41	6
Course teaching on observation (taught in year 2)			36	24
Working with children/young people in a paid capacity whilst on the course	33	17	32	18
Course teaching on values	58	42	32	12

Face-to-face experience with children in personal, work-based and placement settings was seen as particularly valuable. By the end of the programme, most students saw opportunities to work directly with children in fieldwork placements as the most influential factor in their learning. The interviewees described how placements had enabled them to experiment with theoretical models taught didactically

at an earlier stage so that learning could be consolidated and integrated (Kolb, 1984). For inexperienced students, placements had also enabled the process of communicating with children to be demystified. Students were able to discover for themselves how relationship-based working could help children to express themselves and facilitate their participation in assessments, decision-making and care planning. A placement in a children's service setting did not necessarily guarantee good quality practice learning opportunities with children, however. The prioritisation of administrative and case management tasks above direct practice with children in statutory settings left some students feeling insufficiently motivated or supported to make the case for additional time with a child, plan it, execute it effectively and reflect on it afterwards:

> *[Sarah-T5] Especially 'cos the work was so interventionary, you know. The immediacy of that intervention and the level of intervention meant that often actually you bypassed the child almost, 'cos it was about going to conference straightaway and the child doesn't sit in the conference if they're too young.*

Child development teaching was highly rated and was perceived as particularly important by participants who had had little prior contact with children. A structured child observation exercise, supported by reflective seminars (Briggs, 1992), gave students without such experience on this programme a non-threatening window into children's lives and ways, as well as opportunities for developing enhanced self-understanding, attunement and containment (Being capabilities):

> *[Vicky-T5] That was a great learning curve for me because I'd never really been around children that small, so in some ways it was actually being in a home environment, watching them with their parents, learning from how the parents reacted with the children to that was how I should interact with them, and things like going to the toilet with them, things that actually if you haven't had children around you, you don't know what to do.*

The three sessions on communication with children were seen as valuable, particularly at T3. Participants who lacked pre-course experience with children relied on these to provide them with a sufficient foundation in child-focused competence to build on towards the 'applied child-specialist' capabilities needed for roles and tasks within their children's services placement and employment post qualification (these are here defined as capabilities which enable practitioners to address the challenges and constraints linked to communication within social work tasks and contexts, such as how trauma and abuse affect children's manner of engagement and communication and how this should influence practice within child protection assessments). The students appeared particularly to appreciate participatory and/or experimental learning opportunities, such as role-playing themselves from childhood, or role-playing children encountered in professional situations. Many found it helped put them in touch with the world of children:

> *[Sarah-T5] I [thought] about the adults that were around in my life when I was a child, and what made me warm to them, what made me feel comfortable around that and what didn't. It's not rocket science but there's some really basic stuff that goes on there about 'okay, why did I really like that person when I was a child?', and wanting to recreate that when I'm with children. .... connecting with what it's like my experience was as a child....empathising with a child's experience, I suppose, was really helpful...*

Some struggled to imagine themselves as children in the artificial situation of a role play, while others found it emotionally challenging and exposing. It is unclear here whether this was due to the limitations of role play as a learning approach or because these students were less emotionally resilient (Grant and Kinman, 2012). For most, though, the benefits of practising skills and being helped to make an empathic attunement with the inner worlds of children compensated for the awkwardness engendered. What made it manageable for students was where a safe, containing, reflective and playful space had been

created by the tutor (Ward, 2008; Mensinga, 2011) so they could rely on peer support and encouragement

as well as constructive challenge:

> *[Melody-T5] So it's like we need all of those things that we're saying that the children need, so that*
>
> *respect, that safe space, the genuineness and being able to say what you need to say what you want to*
>
> *say.*

Figure 2 Cyclical process of learning to communicate with children
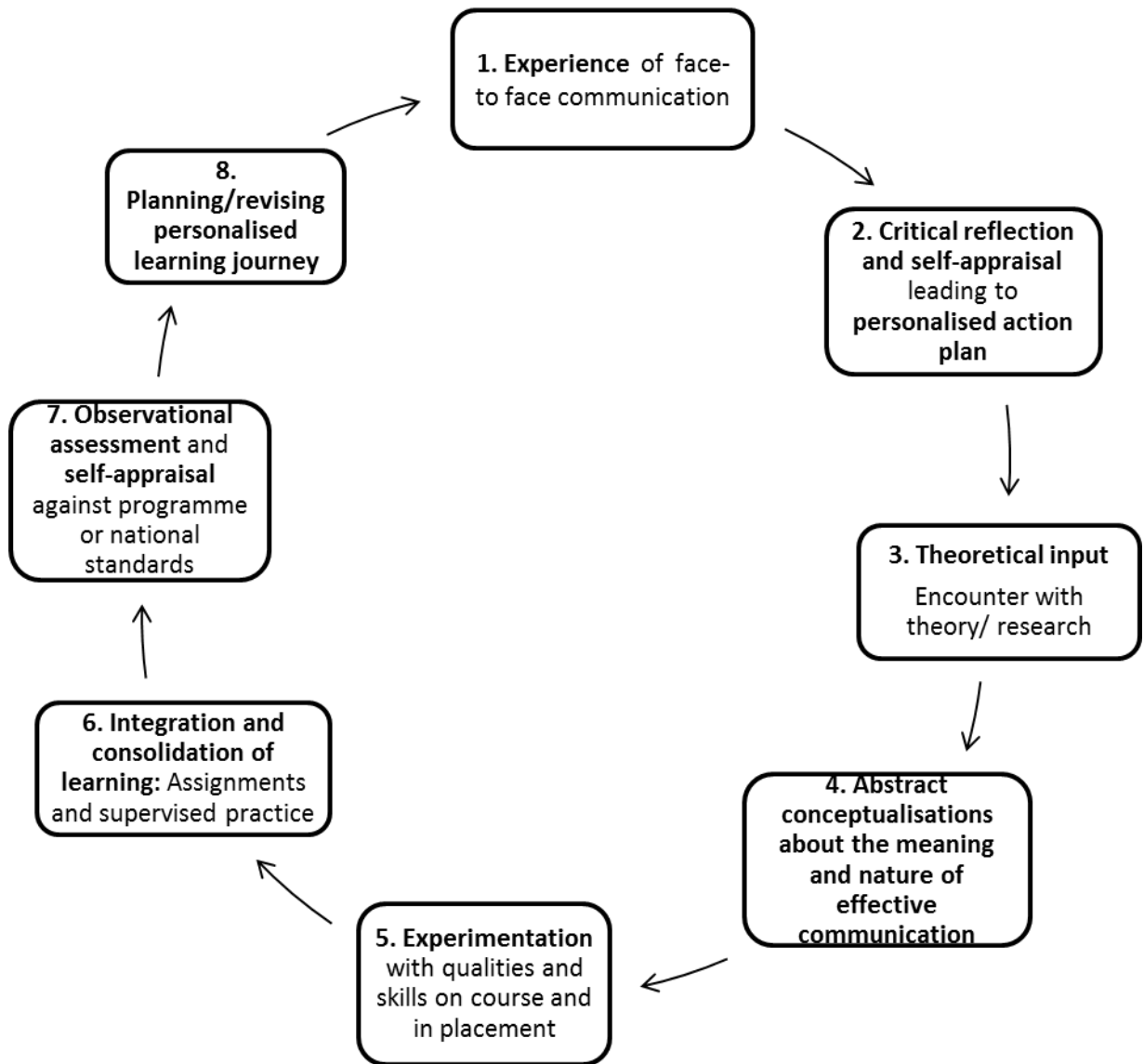
The learning sequence

The CCWC taxonomy provides a framework of the knowledge, skills, values, ethical commitments, personal qualities and emotional capacities practitioners need for effective communication across the range of social work roles and tasks with children. In this it can promote coherent and comprehensive coverage of this topic within the qualifying curriculum. Drawing on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, it is possible to map the kinds of pedagogical approaches and opportunities which might develop students' applied understanding of the CCWC in a coherent and integrated manner. This is shown as an eight-stage cyclical sequence in Figure 2.

Stage 1 of the model begins with students' concrete experience of communication. Applicants begin programmes already having gained experience of communication with different kinds of people and in varied situations from both their personal and professional lives. Critical self-reflection (stage 2) enables this embodied experience to be drawn on inductively so students can form a conceptual understanding of the nature of effective communication. This supports initial self-appraisal against the CCWC through self-audits of individual strengths, gaps in experience and areas of struggle. By mapping their existing levels of competence students can develop a personal action plan for how to reach the required level of capability by the point of qualification. This also aids recognition of the transferability of proficiency learned with adults and in non-social work situations to professional practice with children, so that students' realistic (not over-confident) self-efficacy may be bolstered and motivation to work with children is boosted.

Theoretical input (Stage 3) enables students to form abstract conceptualisations (*Knowing*) about what constitutes effective communication with children (Stage 4).   Offering a range of participatory, experiential learning opportunities for experimentation with communication methods and interpersonal engagement within both the taught curriculum and practice placements (Stage 5) can develop *Doing* and

Being capabilities. Ongoing development of use of self can be reinforced by tutors and supervisors modelling key qualities and providing critically reflective learning spaces within which processes and ethics could be named, so that they remain in students' conscious awareness. Practice-related assignments, such as case studies and process recordings of encounters, enable experiential learning to be consolidated and integrated so that deeper learning is promoted (Stage 6) and applied understanding can be appraised. Competence in direct practice can be assessed through direct observations in placement (Stage 7). Assessment of progress towards capability across the CCWC taxonomy can be re-appraised at key stages (for example, readiness for practice in the first placement, at the end of a placement) and guide future learning goals (Stage 8).

Conclusion

This study of the factors and processes which support qualifying social work students in learning to become effective communicators with children has shed light on some of the complexities involved. While students' applied understanding of the CCWC can be increased by focused skills teaching, they require learning opportunities throughout a programme, including contact with real children in placement, to feel more confident in their capabilities. This may reflect diversity in learning styles, but is also likely to relate to how a variety of approaches and opportunities are needed to develop the requisite knowledge, skills, values and personal qualities. Placements not only enable students to experiment with theoretical models taught didactically at an earlier stage so that learning can be consolidated and integrated (Kolb, 1984), but allow the process of communicating with children to be demystified.

Pre-course experience should be encouraged as it not only promotes students' initial confidence but provides a rich source of experiential learning which can be transferred to work with other user groups. Students need a realistic appraisal of their capabilities so should be provided with opportunities to audit pre-existing expertise early in a programme and develop a personalised action plan for their learning.

Students could benefit from 'recall' teaching and supervision with a specific focus on earlier teaching not only to embed their learning and render it transferable to the practice context, but to ensure important principles remain conscious and amenable to critical reflection.

The learning cycle can be used by programmes to underpin a coherent and integrated approach to coverage of this aspect of the curriculum. How generic, child-focused and applied child-specialist capabilities may be developed through concurrent or consecutive cycles of learning is discussed further in Lefevre (2013).

Limitations

The small numbers, variations in those participating at different time points, and the lack of a comparison group limit the generalisability of these findings. However, this small scale study does provide indications of the learning and development sequence, which would benefit from further testing in studies from a range of countries where there is variation of the academic level of the programme and of student characteristics (such as ethnicity and culture).

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