Developing an “emotional curriculum” for social workers; perceptions of social work lecturers

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The Realities of Social Work

- Social work is satisfying, but emotionally demanding and stressful
  - The job involves competing demands, uncertainty and complexity on a daily basis.
- Stress is related to psychological and physical ill health, burnout, sickness absence and impaired performance
- Stress in newly qualified social workers is high
  - The longevity of a newly qualified social worker is around 8 years – related to stressful nature of the job

(sources: Coffey et al. 2009; Eborall & Garmeston, 2001; LGA, 2009; Curtis et al. 2009)
Social Work Students and Stress

- High rates of psychological distress found in social work students. (Kinman and Grant (2011))
  - 43% achieved scores indicative of “caseness” levels of psychological distress

- Some social work students find their training more stressful than subsequent practice. (Wilks and Spivey, 2010)

- Many students think it is unprofessional to discuss their emotional reactions to the work (Rajan-Rankin, 2013; Grant, 2013 forthcoming)

- Empathy generally seen as positive, but “inaccurate” empathy can lead to empathic distress and distress more generally (Grant, 2013 forthcoming)
An Emotional Curriculum for Social Workers

- Social work students are generally under-prepared for the emotional realities of practice.

- Pedagogies are required that help students develop the skills required.

- We need to cover the affective (the emotional sphere) as well as the cognitive (knowing and thinking sphere).
Curriculum drivers

- QAA Subject benchmarks for Social Work: Students need to be able to manage uncertainty, change and stress.

- HCPC - Professional regulator: Social workers need to be able to manage the emotional impact of practice and maintain their own health and wellbeing.

- College of Social Work: Students should demonstrate an “understanding of the importance of emotional resilience in social work” and, following training, be able to “take steps to manage and promote own safety, health, wellbeing and emotional resilience”

Curriculum drivers

- “Social workers need to develop the emotional resilience to manage the challenges they will face” (Laming, 2009)

- “The most troubling and intractable situations exist when performance difficulties occur in the context of staff who lack accurate empathy, self awareness and self management skills.” (Morrison, 2007)

- The Social Work Task Force similarly identified the need for social workers to develop empathy, resilience, common sense and analytical skills. (SWTF 2009)
The Challenge

- Social Work educators have been charged with equipping students with emotional resilience for professional practice.

- Vital to develop an evidence-based curriculum which supports emotional resilience.

- BUT there are challenges:
  - The term emotional resilience is vague and ill-defined
  - the underpinning qualities of resilience are not widely understood
  - there is little consensus as to how (and if) resilience can be “taught”.

Challenge
So what is resilience and why is it important?

- Resilience has been broadly defined within many disciplines – mainly focused on childhood resilience

- Defined as: “the general capacity for flexible and resourceful adaptation to external and internal stressors” (Klohen 1996)

- Also bouncing back; thriving; successful coping; being stress free; psychological capital

- Linked with health, longevity, job satisfaction, quality of life

- Seen as a trait, an environment feature, an interaction

- Now a “buzz” word in helping professions,
  - but little known about the competencies associated with resilience
What is resilience and why is it important?

Social work students
- Generally uni-dimensional and lacking in complexity
- An innate, fixed quality
- A reactive process
- A self protective coping mechanism
- Involves only intra personal elements

Experienced social workers
- Complex and multi-dimensional
- Can be learned; an interaction between personal qualities and support structures
- A proactive mechanism ensuring maintenance of social work values, empathy, emotional containment, leading to improved outcomes with service users
- A form of psychological capital, an active dynamic process
- Interpersonal and intrapersonal elements
Research Studies: 2
Grant & Kinman

- Which inter- and intra-personal qualities predict resilience in student social workers?
  - Examined emotional intelligence, empathy, social competence, reflective ability
  - Also included coping, social justice
  - Used multi-dimensional measures of empathy and reflection

- To what extent does resilience actually predict wellbeing?

- How can the findings enhance resilience and how can the social work curriculum support this?
The Model - based on Grant & Kinman

- Emotional Literacy
  - Intra/inter personal

- Appropriate empathy

- Reflective ability:
  - Self reflection
  - Empathetic reflection
  - Reflective communication

- Social competence/resources

- Sense of social justice

- Appropriate coping
  - Rational
  - Emotional

- Psychological and physical health

- Emotional resilience

Enhanced practice?

Personal characteristics and life experience
Preparation for practice (curriculum/placements)
Organisational factors/managers competencies
Demands, control, role clarity, support, supervision, training
Summary of our research findings to date:

- Emotional resilience is a complex construct encompassing many qualities – it should be seen as an umbrella term and context dependent.

- Student social workers need to develop competencies that underpin resilience to improve their wellbeing and practice.

- Students need to be supported to develop emotional literacy.

- Students need training to develop reflective ability, social competence and to understand the multifaceted nature of empathy.

- Students need reflective supervision to explore the emotional impact of the work.
Rationale for present study.

- Little research to date on how emotional resilience is covered in the curriculum (if at all).
- To date, research has focused on qualified staff and students’ understandings of resilience, but not educators.
- Consequently, sharing of ideas across HEI’s is limited.
- Educators’ views are vital in order to develop an effective emotional curriculum.
Aims

This study aimed to explore

- How social work educators perceive emotional resilience and the importance they attach to it.

- The extent to which emotional resilience and the qualities that underpin it feature in the curriculum.

- The teaching and learning strategies that are currently utilised to help students enhance emotional resilience and self care.

- Educators’ views about the development of an emotional curriculum and how this might be accomplished.
The Study

Sample
- 80 HEI’s running qualifying training programmes at UG and PG level. Emails sent to course leaders
- 35 Universities responded - 45% response rate

Method
- Quantitative- online questionnaire (open and closed questions). Descriptive analysis
- Qualitative- follow up via telephone interviews n= 15. Analysed through thematic content analysis
Questions Asked: 1

Online questionnaire- some indicative questions

- What does resilience mean to you?
- To what extent
  - ...do you think it is important for social workers to be emotionally resilient?
  - ...do you think Universities should assess students’ resilience at the recruitment stage?
  - ...are different people responsible for the enhancing students’ resilience?
  - ...are techniques found to enhance resilience utilised in your curriculum?
Questions Asked: 2

- Follow up telephone interviews - some indicative questions

- How do you think educators should respond to the call for enhanced resilience in the profession?
- What can students do to enhance their resilience?
- What opportunities do students have (in their personal lives, in education, and in placement) to enhance their resilience?
- To what extent do you think Universities should measure students’ resilience as part of the selection procedure?
- To what extent do you think an emotional curriculum is required in social work training?
Findings: Is resilience important?

- **92%** of respondents saw emotional resilience as “very important” or “vital” for social workers.

  And

- **95%** of respondents believe that recruiting social workers who show signs of resilience is “important”.

  And

- Only **24%** believe people are “naturally” resilient.
Findings: Identifying Resilience

- 0 respondents use diagnostic test at the recruitment stage to examine levels of (or capacity for) resilience

And

- 45% reported using “activities” to assess students' resilience at interview.

None were specifically designed to assess resilience, but some evidence of specific questions about resilience asked at interview.

“Social work is a stressful occupation- how do you cope with stress?”

“How have you shown resilience to stress in the past?”
Findings: Improving resilience

- If only **24%** SW course leaders believe people are naturally resilient.

**How can it be improved?**

- **96%** thought that previous work experience, supervision and discussions with Practice Educators was important.

And

- **100%** of respondents thought that support of family and friends was important.

**Whereas**

- Few believed resilience could be enhanced by “self help” literature.
Findings: Helping Students

Students themselves were considered most responsible for managing their own resilience and wellbeing.

Lecturers, academic tutors and placement agencies were seen as least important.

Practice educators considered to be in the best position to help students develop resilience,

BUT respondents considered that 82% find placements stressful.
Findings: The Emotional Curriculum

These techniques are presently used in the curriculum.

- Reflective writing and supervision are those most used in the curriculum.
- Coping strategies and mentoring presently have the least input in the curriculum.
Findings: Enhancing Resilience

These techniques are seen as important in enhancing resilience.

- All the techniques are seen as beneficial.
- Mentoring and peer coaching are identified as least important although there maybe less of an understanding of these techniques.
- Educators appear to advocate a broad based emotional curriculum without a clear direction.
Findings: The Emotional Curriculum

When comparing what is identified as important to enhancing resilience and what is applied in the curriculum:

- Reflection is seen as important and is part of the curriculum but it is unclear if links to resilience are made.

- Coping strategies are seen as important but not addressed within the curriculum. And yet students are identified as most responsible for their own resilience and need to be given appropriate tools.
Findings 6: Innovative Practice

The following areas of practice were identified as enhancing resilience:

- The use of mindfulness to enhance resilience.
- Use of peer counselling in creating support systems for students.
- Peer assisted learning groups.
- Use of reflective journaling.
- Managing expectations of practice.
Qualitative Findings 1:

- An emotional curriculum is widely recognised as important for social work students.

- A wide variation in understanding of the term emotional resilience

  “Resilience is having strategies to manage difficulties and challenges, it also means emotional intelligence”

  “Emotional awareness, control, realism, support networks and social capital, stress management avoidance of burnout”

  “Being able to bounce back from adverse events”
Qualitative Findings 2: Key Themes

- Some respondents questioned the ideological basis of resilience as applied to the social work role;
  - A focus on the individual implies they are solely responsible for their own emotional resilience and lets employers off the hook.
  - Resilience may lead to compliance, groupthink and negation of values.
Qualitative Findings 3: Key Themes

- Concern re emotional issues being raised in the classroom and how to support students if the topics or issues resonate with them and cause underlying psychological difficulties.

- Self awareness is crucial but concern as to how this can be improved in the classroom.

- Supervision in placements not always focused on reflection: more on process and caseloads.
Implications of findings

- An emotional curriculum seen as important, but little consistency in how this is perceived and operated.
- Emotional resilience is vital, but an understanding of variation in meaning, and the competencies that underpin it, is needed.
- More emphasis should be placed on emotional resilience at recruitment - development of situational judgment tests?
- More emphasis needed on personal strategies, such as stress and coping techniques
- Practice educators are a vital link and need more training and support.
- Lecturers would value assistance in building an emotional curriculum to develop emotional resilience in social workers
Emotional Curriculum at The University of Bedfordshire

First Year Enhancing emotional literacy & reflective ability
A series of teaching on skills development days concentrating on developing emotional literacy and reflective ability.

Second Year Developing a tool kit of coping mechanisms
The Wellbeing Day
A series of workshops aiming to enhance psychological, social and cognitive skills. Specific teaching on implications of stress and development of coping techniques.

Third Year Enhancing Reflective Ability
Teaching designed to develop high level reflective skills, emotional literacy and accurate empathy. Preparation for the realities of practice and links to the responsibilities of organisations with explicit links to competencies.
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<th>Focus</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
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<td>Meditation &amp; Mindfulness</td>
<td>Mindfulness meditation is the ability to be able to focus on the present moment without distraction.</td>
<td>Mindfulness is a useful tool in regulating ones emotions (Kabat Zinn 2005). Research suggests it may enhance student social workers wellbeing (Ying 2009) and can reduce over identification (Bishop 2004) and empathetic distress</td>
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<td>Cognitive Behavioural Therapy</td>
<td>CBT focuses on the way people think in order to help them develop strategies to manage emotional or behavioural problems.</td>
<td>By challenging unhelpful thinking and perceptions students can be enabled to better manage anxiety and problem solve more effectively - key skills in self regulation (Goleman 2004).</td>
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<td>Supervision for Reflective Practice</td>
<td>Supervision in social work often focuses merely on accountability and the importance of it as a protective mechanism is often underestimated.</td>
<td>Anxiety, confusion and fear of complexity are often experienced (Banks 2006). The role of reflective supervision in creating space for reflective and emotional thinking is a crucial way of containing anxiety and creating conditions for workers</td>
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<td>Peer Coaching</td>
<td>Understanding the role of a buddy or coach in reducing stress can assist in stress management.</td>
<td>Peer coaching has been found to be particularly beneficial in sharing experiences and practices, managing personal problems and promoting wellbeing during stressful periods in students in other disciplines. (Short, Kinman, &amp; Baker in press), and also assisting reflective practice in professionals (Zwart et al 2007).</td>
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<td>Time Management</td>
<td>This session focuses on how to create effective and realistic work-plans by prioritising workload and managing multiple priorities</td>
<td>Learning how to manage time effectively is a key factor in minimising stress, building resilience and improving quality of life.</td>
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<td>Self Knowledge and Action Planning</td>
<td>Self knowledge is a key factor in stress management. Gaining insight into what we do (or don’t do) that make things better or worse during stressful times is often the first step in enhancing wellbeing.</td>
<td>By understanding and identifying the antecedents, behaviours and consequences relating to the stress experienced, action plans can be put in place to change beliefs and behaviours which cause stress.</td>
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Conclusion

- The emotional curriculum in social work education needs more development.
- Stress and coping needs to be more emphasised in the curriculum.
- More research needed into how and whether resilience can be tested for during recruitment.
- Lectures & Practice Educators need more support in developing the emotional curriculum.
Ongoing Projects

- Ongoing research: Resilience in newly qualified social workers, enhancing managers capacities to build resilience. Also, the use of emotional writing.

- Publication of a book in Spring 2014- The Emotionally Resilient Social Worker, Palgrave Macmillan (Grant and Kinman)

- A research and good practice dissemination network for those interested in enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers. (louise.grant@beds.ac.uk or gail.kinman@beds.ac.uk)
Questions

- Should we do more at the recruitment stage to assess the capacity for emotional resilience and similar competencies?
- Should we use diagnostic techniques such as situational judgment tests when recruiting students to helping professions?
- What are the most important parts for the development of an emotional curriculum?
- How might an emotional curriculum be assessed?
- Should there be a national emotional curriculum? If so, how should the content be decided?
- What are the barriers for an emotional curriculum from staff and students?
Final Thoughts

“ We need to develop a coordinated strategy throughout the course that it is linked to knowledge and skills………. and sessions that can be accessed to help them manage periods of increased stress.”

“ We could do with some way of measuring resilience in a more effective way.”
References

References


