Challenges of Developing an Emotional Resilience Curriculum in social work education in England

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a case study example of supporting students that fail social work placements in England. The author argues that struggling on a social work placement is associated with lack of emotional resilience. Secondly, a case for an emotional resilience or emotional intelligence curriculum is made. There is evidence that current social work educators and education policymakers are vaguely aware of how to develop an emotional resilience curriculum that is relevant to social work practice. This paper aims to stimulate and inform debate about the role of emotional resilience in the training of social workers and the challenges of implementing a curriculum with professional attributes of emotional intelligence.

Keywords: Challenges, Emotional Resilience, Curriculum, Social Work Education

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will use a case study example of my experience of supporting students that fail social work placements in England. I will argue that struggling on a social work placement is associated with lack of emotional resilience. Secondly, a case for an emotional resilience or emotional intelligence curriculum is made. I contend that current social work educators and education policymakers are vaguely aware of how to develop an emotional resilience curriculum that is relevant to social work practice. This paper seeks to stimulate and inform debate about the role of emotional resilience in the training of social workers and the challenges of implementing a curriculum with professional attributes of emotional intelligence.

Since the late 1990s, the concept of emotional resilience or what others refer to as Emotional Intelligence (EI) has grown in popularity in Health and Social Care in the UK (Goleman and Chernis, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005; Grant and Kinman, 2014). Goleman (1996: 11) and Goleman et. al. (2002) were the first authors to provide a definition of emotional resilience in the context of health and social care, they define this phenomenon as "being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope". The notion of positive adaptation to adversity, as well as the importance of self-motivation, coping strategies and peer support, are also recurring themes in the definitions of emotional resilience (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2015). According to Morrison (2007), emotional intelligence just like professional values is "one of the cornerstones for effective social work practice and current social work teaching, practice, management and research can ill afford to ignore" (p.246).

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It is recognized that social work practice can be emotionally draining with high levels of work-related stress and many social workers leaving the profession (Johnson et al. 2005; Grant, et al. 2013). The findings of a study of nursing professionals conducted by Aitken et al. (2012) reported that 42% described themselves as either stressed or "burned out." Social work trainees, midwifery students, and student nurses have also been found to experience high levels of work-related stress and burnout (Kinman and Grant 2011). Emotional resilience is considered a key competence for social workers, nurses and midwives (Howe 2008; Byrom and Downe 2010). Research shows that emotional resilience protects against burnout and compassion fatigue (Görgens-Ekermans and Brand 2012) and plays a role in developing empathy, emotional boundaries, compassion, person-centered care and it helps to avoid over-involvement in clients or harboring cynical attitudes towards them (Grant et al. 2013).

2. Emotional Resilience and Social Work Education

 The training of social workers in England involves attending lectures at the university, service user involvement sessions, social work placements in the voluntary sector or statutory settings and attending Practice Learning Days facilitated by university tutors. For students to qualify as social workers, they must attend two placements of 70 days each in both voluntary and statutory settings. Each student has a Practice Educator, work-based supervisor, and academic tutor. The role of an academic tutor is to coordinate all placement stakeholders and provide a link between the placement agency and the university (Bucks Placement Curriculum Handbook, 2018). The academic tutor visits students on placement on two occasions, at the initial placement agreement meeting and midway, and sometimes at the end of the placement (Finch, 2013). Placement visits provide the tutor with the opportunity to check whether appropriate learning opportunities are in place so that the student meets assessment requirements (Finch, 2013). The academic tutor also ensures that the university's standards, policies, and procedures are being adhered to (Watson and West, 2003). In the unfortunate event that a student is likely to fail, an Action Plan is put in place so as to support the student. The academic tutor's visit to the placement is necessary because mechanisms are consistently developed to monitor the student's progress   and manage any struggling students (Finch, 2013).

In my experience, students tend to struggle on placements due to a multiplicity of reasons. Which include a breakdown in communication between the practice educator and the student, family problems, unrealistic expectations by the placement agency, coursework, assignments, financial difficulties   or health problems such as depression caused by stressors at home, in the placement or university. Moreover, high levels of work-related stress, depression, and burnout have been found among social work students and qualified professionals (Freshwater and Stickley, 2004; Jack and Donnellan 2010; Kinman and Grant 2011). Research conducted by Tobin and Carson (1994) found that training to be a social worker or nurse can be more stressful than qualified practice. Studies have found that some students are unprepared for realities of social work practice, which can affect their emotional well-being (Clements et al. 2013). Jack and Donellan (2010) suggested that strong emotional reactions to practice learning have an impact on self-confidence and competence. Other commentators have argued that the stress experienced by trainee social

workers and nursing students is likely to be exacerbated by their reluctance to disclose their feelings due to fear of being judged as incompetent or lacking in resilience (Wilks and Spivey 2010). Research conducted by Kinman and Grant (2011) found that social work students who develop effective reflective practice skills were more resilient and reported very high levels of emotional wellbeing and perseverance.

A study by Finch and Taylor (2013) looked at unpleasant emotional experiences of Practice Educators when a decision is made to fail a social work student. Parker (2010) noted that the experience of failing a student on placement is often "distressing for all" and Milner and O'Byrne (1986) suggested that academic tutors tend to "social work" failing students, rather than managing appropriately as academics and educators. They described the experience of managing a failing a student as:

"… unpleasant, messy, emotionally fraught, carrying also the threat of appeal and subsequent litigation. It is, therefore, to be avoided at all costs" (Milner and O'Byrne, 1986, p. 21).

Although Milner and O'Byrne's study was carried out in 1986, the experience of failing a student is still characterized by unpleasantness, disorganization, blame games and emotional pain by all actors. Mechanisms of handling failure are more procedural, administrative, oppressive and lacking in humanity or a sense of apathy from the university and sometimes Practice Educators. Despite the overwhelming evidence of difficulties experienced by trainee social workers, the curriculum for social work training continues to place little emphasis on emotional resilience or self-care strategies to protect students' personal well-being (Grant et al. 2013).

On 9th January 2017, the Health Care and Professionals Council (HCPC) outlined 15 new standards of proficiency (SOPs) for social workers in England. The `standards of proficiency set out clear expectations of social work students' knowledge and abilities when they start practicing as qualified social workers (www.hcpc-uk.org). These standards of proficiency include being able to "identify and apply strategies to build emotional Intelligence" (www.HCPC-uk.org). The disbanded College of Social Work had identified emotional intelligence as a key professional attribute in the training of social workers (Grant, et al. 2013). The College's idea was to implement a curriculum that would prepare students for sustained employment in social work. Academic departments and social work educators were therefore charged with developing a curriculum that enhances emotional intelligence for trainee social workers (Grant et al., 2013). The problem is that social work educators were tasked with designing and delivering a curriculum on an area they lacked competence. The curriculums they followed when they trained as social workers did not have professional attributes of resilience and neither did they attain any professional training in emotional resilience as academics. Educators were, therefore, unable to confidently pass on emotional resilience skills to their students and up to now this kind of curriculum as recommended by the College of Social Work and the HCPC   has not been implemented (Grant et al. 2013). Grant and his colleagues questioned the effectiveness of implementing a curriculum where there were concerns about competences of academics including how they perceived the concept of resilience,

how they think it develops, and to what extent they see it as an intrinsic component of the social work education and practice (Grant et al. 2013). Another aspect that was disregarded by the College of Social Work and the HCPC's standards of proficiency for social workers are stressors faced by academics and other social work educators. These stressors in themselves impact on the implementation of a curriculum with professional attributes of emotional resilience.
What stresses are experienced by academics?

Social work educators in the UK face their stresses in the workplace with little or no support and this alone could affect the implementation of a curriculum that has strong principles of resilience. Stresses encountered by academics   and social work educators include unmanageable workloads, unrealistic timescales, managerialism, bureaucratization, isolation from colleagues, emphasis on keeping students happy, low decision-making power, academic snobbery and frequent lack of support from peers and management (Barnes, et.al. 1999; Archibong et. al. 2010).

Furthermore, expectations of university lecturers are very high with salaries below the minimum wage when you take into consideration the amount of work to be completed weekly. Lecturers on a full time or part-time contracts are expected to work twelve hours per day (teaching, marking, preparing lectures, visiting students on placements, group and individual tutorials, team meetings, etc). Attending conferences, research and writing for publication are no longer in the job description of lecturers and senior lecturers of social work in most UK universities. Lecturers who were more focused on teaching and supporting practice learning have seen their workloads triple, and those who were interested in research output have seen their outputs dwindle (Community Care, 2015).

A social work senior lecturer who resigned after 25 years of teaching wrote an article in Community Care expressing his frustrations with the current regime in social work education. He raised concerns about the "on-going battle with university managers to uphold and maintain the academic and professional standards required   and expected on a social work degree programme" (Community Care 2015). This social work educator whose article was published anonymously raised concerns about a new culture of social work students, who "see themselves primarily as consumers rather than learners and have a profound sense of entitlement that if they have paid good money then they deserve a good degree" (Community Care 2015). The social work lecturer criticised the demanding and vociferous student body with militant social work student leaders who are more encouraged to complain rather than to work hard and "a squeamish management team who are more concerned about increasing student numbers, generating income, keeping students happy and enhancing the student experience" (Community Care 2015). There is a worrying culture of undergraduate students who do not read or work hard but expect to get good grades and will complain if their marks are low.

Associated with student's entitlement and the commercialization of social work education is student incivility that is on the rise in the UK and USA (Paula, 2009; Keating, 2016) and affects lecturers' morale and resilience. Studies in the UK and USA have looked at this new student

culture of incivility which university managers tolerate or ignore due to the business-customer model that most universities have adopted. A study by Paula (2009) surveyed 355 undergraduate nursing students and 57 teaching staff at a University in the North West of England. Findings of this study confirmed that students and lecturers were experiencing very high levels of disruptive students' behavior in the classroom with little intervention from university managers who are more focused on keeping students happy. Cleary (2018) research on the marketization of social work education in the UK is the first of its kind in England. The study looks at cases of student incivility which is ignored by university managers who are placing increasing emphasis on income generation, NSS scores and performance management targets. The findings of this study highlight a level of concern among academics regarding the influence of market forces on the academic-student relationship and academic decision making (Cleary, 2018). Another interesting study was carried out in the US by Wahler and Badger (2016). The participants of this study were social work lecturers (N=327). The study examined lecturers' experiences with social work students' incivility in both undergraduate and postgraduate education. Findings showed that some behaviors that are deemed disrespectful occur in social work classrooms and are more frequent among undergraduate students. Characteristics of incivility among social work students include arriving late or leaving early, talking inappropriately in class, texting, making confrontational or sarcastic comments to lecturers, or using computers for tasks unrelated to class activities (Ausbrooks, Jones, & Tijerina, 2011). Social work profession emphasizes core values of integrity, respect, social justice, anti-oppressive practice, anti-discriminatory practice, anti-racist practice, the belief and worth of all people, and the importance of human relationships (BASW, 2017). Acts of incivility in classrooms are considered incongruent with social work professional values and as an indication that perpetrators of such acts are "not fit for practice" (Ausbrooks et al., 2011).

Incivility in social work education impacts not only lecturers' morale but also on students' learning and emotional wellbeing. The commercialization of social work, student entitlement, and incivility affect the implementation of an educational curriculum with emotional resilience attributes. University managers and education policymakers should consider challenging behaviors that affect learning, and it is after eradicating the culture of entitlement and incivility that an emotional resilience curriculum can be developed. Secondly, a pedagogy of education is required that focuses more explicitly on personal and social competencies of the affective domain of each social work student (Kinman and Grant, 2001; Kinman and Grant, 2014). Personal competencies include self-awareness and self-management; social competencies include social awareness and social management skills (Morrison, 2007). The understanding and handling of one's own and others' emotions is a critical aspect at every stage of the social work practice: engagement, assessment, observation, decision making, planning and intervention (Kinman and Jones, 2001; Morrison, 2007; Grant, 2013). A student involved in acts of incivility is unlikely to perform these tasks effectively due to lack of skills of handling other's emotions. These competencies can only be developed in students that come to the university to learn and where university managers are focused on promoting a culture of learning and preparing students for a successful career in social work. Students who develop skills of empathy have excellent self-awareness skills. If a student is indulging in acts of incivility, then it will be difficult to have any empathic skills or any emotional connection with service users.

Kinman and Grant (2014) suggest that empathy needs to be semi-permeable and should allow emotional connection with service users but provide boundaries or distance from the distress felt by service users. Figure 1 below illustrates the cycle of Empathy in social work practice. Figure 2 is the Emotional Resilience Paradigm, and it demonstrates the importance of understanding emotions in ourselves and others. Social work educators that are stressed due to workloads and other stressors are likely to struggle to implement a curriculum of emotional resilience. It is therefore essential to   have mechanisms of supporting these lecturers, first by university managers acknowledging that there is a problem and finding effective solutions. For example, the PGCE in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for lecturers should follow a curriculum that has emotional curriculum attributes as this will enable educators to be well equipped with professional skills of resilience which they can pass on to their students.
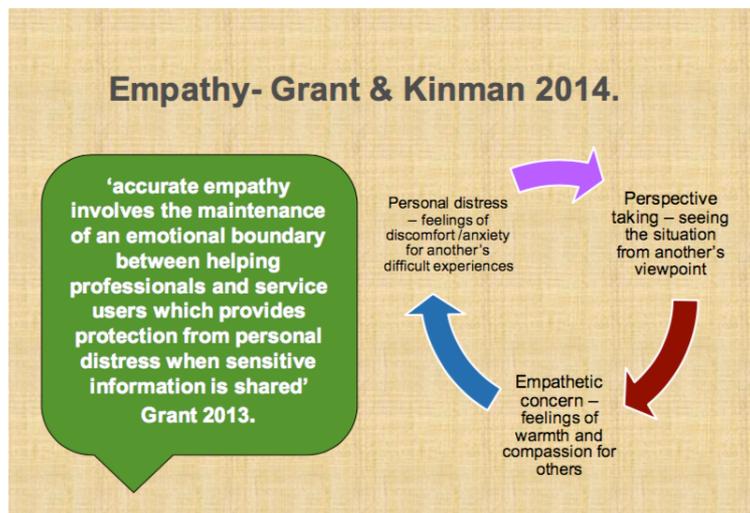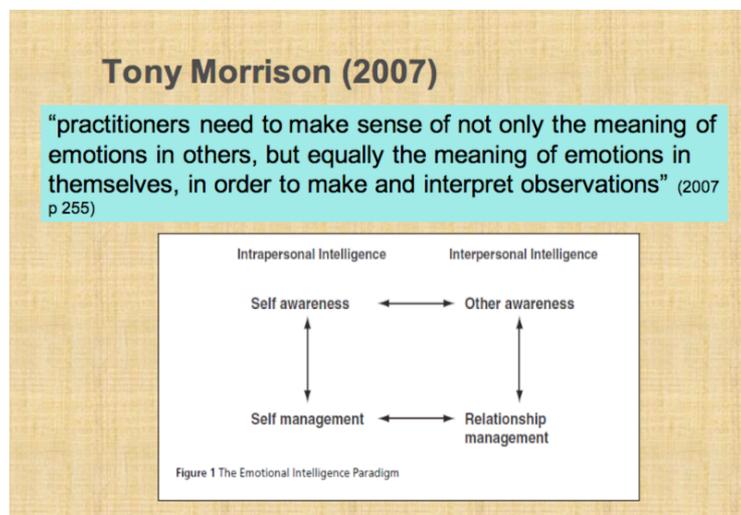

Figure 1 Source: Kinnman and Grant (2014)

Figure 2: Morrison's (2007) Emotional Intellience Paradigm

3. Conclusion

It is important for social work to develop an emotional resilience curriculum that takes into consideration personal competences as mentioned above. Additionally, an Emotional Intelligence Paradigm should be integrated into all aspects of social work teaching, learning and practice. This will allow students, practitioners and social work educators to develop an appreciation of the need

for emotional intelligence, and the competencies that underpin these important skills. A carefully designed emotional intelligence curriculum will enable social work students to build a repertoire of resilience-building mechanisms that can be honed over time through exposure to challenging practice experiences (Kinman and Grant, 2011; Kinman and Jones, 2011).

Lastly, it is important to point out that every human being has the potential of developing his or her emotional resilience. Therefore, part of the recruitment of student social workers should include emotional resilience tests which would enable educators to identify suitable candidates for the programme. There are various tests available to test a person's Emotional Resilience which include Bar-On EQi (Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations (Bar-On, 2000), the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (Bar- on, 2000) and the Emotional Competency Inventory (Bar-on, 2000).

This paper has argued that the implementation of an emotional resilience curriculum requires disciplined students who are passionate about social change. Students who are passionate are able to step-back and examine their thinking by asking thought provoking questions. This kind of criticality leads to effective critical thinking and promotes constructive criticism in all areas of practice. Secondly, this paper examines students' disrespectful behaviors which impact on the implementation of an emotional resilience curriculum. The paper contends that students' disrespectful behaviors are incongruent with social work professional values and incivility in the classroom has a negative impact on the morale of social work educators and students learning. To implement an emotional resilience curriculum, social work educators need the support of university managers whose approach of "keeping students happy" is threatening academic standards. A culture of entitlement that universities are encouraging is compromising professional standards (Cleary, 2018). The place of emotion, reflective practice and critical reflection in social work are in danger of becoming increasingly marginalized if universities continue to commercialize education and compromising academic and professional standards.

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