

Reflective Journal

Context

I came to the advocacy degree looking for a platform from which to speak up, to empower, to promote resilience with, and to encourage a sense of 'enough-ness' in children from mentally unwell families. Not with an accusation that with mental illness comes poor childcare and parenting but with an understanding that mental illness can disrupt relationships and create adversity in families and households. With this in mind, I felt I needed a placement that actively seeks to promote and protect the rights and welfare of children and young people, to observe and gain experience in the types of duties a children's commissioner has, and the legislative powers a child commissioner can use to create positive outcomes. My placement was based with staff teams in the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC), however, the majority of my placement hours were spent off-site at various events that were hand-picked by the OCC to reflect my professional interests in children's welfare, advocacy, participation and rights, for which I was very grateful.

Referring to others on my placement, I will use their job titles rather than their names to maintain confidentiality and consistency throughout the piece.

I will be using the reflective cycle of Gibbs (1988) to record and assess the experiences within practice on my placement as I feel that the emotional element within the sequence is significant. I feel emotion is a fundamental part of what makes us human and plays a very definite part of my sense of self.

Experience 1

Description

The first experience I would like to reflect on using the Gibbs (1998) model is the peer reaction to my placement. I approached several organisations for a chance to observe their practice and was also offered several opportunities based on being quite well known in my local area for my commitment to the third sector. However, after meeting the children's commissioner at different events, I was quite confident that I would like a placement working within the Office of the Child Commissioner (OCC), learning and discovering what it is exactly a commissioner can do for the welfare of children and young people. I had emailed the office and got passed around for a few weeks not knowing if it were a request that could

be accommodated or if I was making a nuisance of myself. I decided to take the bull by the horns and ask the commissioner directly. My enthusiasm was welcomed, and I was talked through the procedure, which after being passed round staff via email for a few weeks without much reassurance was a relief. The Human Resources Manager emailed the day after with a spreadsheet of opportunities hand-picked by the commissioner which she felt met my course objectives and professional interests. I received this email whilst I was at the university with a group of students I study with regularly.

Feelings

At the time I was hugely excited by the email that came through from the OCC for two reasons, the first being that it was the formal offer of a placement that I'd been hoping for and the second because of the calibre of events that had been identified as acceptable to shadow the commissioner at. What I was unprepared for was for my peer group to virtually ignore my news and dismiss my excitement leaving me to feel that I had no one to celebrate, what I felt was an accomplishment, with. Over the coming weeks, I felt ridiculed and teased about my placement by one fellow student with statements such as 'yes, we know all about your fancy placement', 'you are above us now with your snobby government friends' and 'not now, we don't want to know about all your posh conferences'. At first, this could have been construed as friendly banter but later began to feel quite venomous, and I realised it was responsible for me feeling like I was unable to share anything of my placement with my peers when it came up in conversation, consequently I would wander away or leave the room. I felt that the gaining of a placement had been turned into a competition by this colleague, and on discussion with others in the group, it was revealed that they felt the same. Khon (1992), positions competitiveness negatively within academia. Khon (1992), describes competitiveness as a socially accepted way of alleviating anxiety, however, offers that it only serves to increase aggression and hostility resulting in a vicious cycle of stress for the instigator. I was disappointed by this individual's behaviour and I felt irritated that they could not switch perspectives and display pleasure that I had received a module placement somewhere so relevant to my interests.

Evaluation

Initially drawing attention to my placement and its opportunities did not work well, the first observation hours were scheduled in The Senedd with the commissioner and various Welsh Ministers at the Innovation in Children's Rights and Advocacy Conference which caused

further teasing and accusations of rubbing shoulders with the elite which felt patronising. This prompted me to keep details of shadowing hours to myself. However, this did serve me well later within reflective writing as I found by not sharing too much of the details of my placement hours meant I had not weakened my memory as I am aware can happen to me regularly. Cotrell (1989), writes of the stages of memory from experience to recall, and suggests that retaining information long enough to maintain it and recollect it, is best broken down. Also contributing that good recall is linked to how much attention is given to the subject memorized. It also did not work well to internalise my feelings. Reflectively speaking, this was the beginning of an ill-feeling towards this member of my study group, which has continued to cause distress. Looking back, I feel I should have dealt with this immediately and differently.

Analysis.

The Gibbs model of reflection instructs the analysis of our experiences. I realize that my behaviour could have been considered boastful, the news gave me a huge surge of confidence and perhaps this was offensive and overpowering to others. Alternatively, the behaviour of the fellow student could be explained by jealousy. Harris and Derby (2010), clarify that feelings of jealousy create a threat to the representation of self, explaining that determining how to respond to the threat perceived, depends on coping mechanisms activated by the rival. Comparing this concept with that of Hudley *et al.* (2008) who argue that maintaining the integrity of self is a primary threat to the academic environment, I can attribute both theories to the individual who offended me.

Having read and listened to literature in social psychology, I offer the theory of displacement in response to not being able to confront the student about how I felt. This is described by Weiner (1986), as a defence mechanism designed to suppress feelings when we are too scared to express our emotions directly back to the individual who provoked unease. Instead, internalisation leads to carrying the emotional state from one situation to another and finding other less threatening individuals to safely disseminate our negative feelings on to.

Applying this psychological theory has helped me to understand that I should have made more effort to offload these emotions, seeking a more authoritative route within the university and not burdening other students. There are university policies and procedures to support students feeling oppressed, with chapter nine, point one, of the UWTSD Student Harassment and Bullying Policy indicating that informally discussing options available and agreeing an appropriate approach is part of its policy procedure. I now realise that the policy is in place to help alleviate tension such as this building and wish I had considered seeking support at the time.

In retrospect, I would do several things differently. It had been important to me to gain a placement somewhere which stimulated my professional interests, challenged my perceptions and which gave me focus on which to improve my personal goals. I was not seeking the best placement in the class, neither did I seek to be above anyone else, however, I did seek what I considered to be the best placement for me.

I could have tried harder to voice my feelings to my peer group and the offending student at the time. I have realised that I avoid explaining my negative or meaningful emotions to other people for fear of getting tearful or for causing confrontation.

I have learnt that I internalise things too much and that I would like to learn how to speak up when feeling oppressed by others when there should not be a power imbalance between us, however (Thompson 2015), confirms that if someone is causing distress without knowing they are doing so, it may take very different forms of communication and skills to interpret the message to them. This will take further research as Thompson does not actually confirm what these extra communication skills are.

Having experienced these circumstances, I have become aware that I am resilient and on reading more with regards to resilience, for example, Turners (2017) musings, that while it can not change circumstances one finds themselves within, it can support how we cope and how to seek different outcomes from moments of adversity.

Action plan

In future, I will be more guarded in my excitement and keep my emotions in check, realising that other people may not see my excitement as enthusiasm and pride but as bragging and showing off.

Equally, I will have more foresight to realise that within the perceptions of some, the end goal of getting a placement had become a competition and that they were possibly jealous for not being the winner of their own game, and I need not in future see that as exclusion but meet it with better communication skills. I believe it would be of great benefit to me to attend some classes on assertiveness and how to verbalise my unease. However, as the experience has highlighted areas for self-improvement, it has proved justified in its purpose.

Experience 2

Description

I accompanied one of the Office of Children's Commissioners (OCC) participation team to a south wales comprehensive schools personal, social and health education (PHSE) day, to deliver six back to back workshops to year seven students throughout the day. The objective of the sessions was to raise children and young people's awareness of *The United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child* (UNCRC) (1989) and the articles within it. Also, to enhance staff understanding of the convention and how it can be implemented in the classroom to aid pupil well-being, participation, and inclusion. This being in line with Welsh Governments, rights-based approach in terms of policymaking within the *Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011*. Each year seven class was broken up into four or five groups of their own making, each with approximately six pupils in each. They were sat around large tables and for the most part happy to have a day away from the usual timetable and to be welcoming unfamiliar organisations to their school. I had quickly become comfortable in this environment, was enjoying the atmosphere and welcomed the recognition of my 'pitch in' attitude by the participation officer. The episode happened in the fifth session and was prompted by the question 'add up around the table all the siblings you have and tell me the total'. This question caused confusion. It needed to be clarified that stepsiblings and half-siblings were to be accounted for, however, I was asked by one child 'my brother is in prison, does he still count?'

Feelings

I was taken aback by his question and was immediately aware that my face had given that away. I felt surprised, saddened, and moved. I did not feel shocked about his brother's imprisonment or judgemental about the situation the family may be in, what I was feeling was, saddened that a twelve-year-old boy was confused as to whether imprisonment took away the title of brother and his position in the family. That he was feeling unsure of his relationship with his brother being that he was incarcerated. Research by Heaton (2014), describes that feelings of shame or guilt relating to sibling incarceration are not necessarily born of the consequences of criminal activity, but more the result of an inability to process the loss and grief alongside the difficulty and lack of opportunity in which to discuss them. Heaton confirms this state as *ambiguous grief*, grief occurring as a result of a person being physiologically still existing but consistently missing from everyday life.

I was also furious with myself that my face had displayed a reaction before my brain had engaged. I felt that I had let the boy down and that I had let myself down. Howe (2008), writes that facial expressions are reflexes, automatic reactions to a typically social stimulus, conveying a large amount of emotional information without the requirement for words. I had up until then felt like I was an important part of the workshops, encouraging the children to contribute, creating rights-based role plays, and listening to how they thought rights could be interpreted with parents at bedtime in the home. Further-more I believed that the children were enjoying, each workshop had been lively, enthusiastic, and energetic.

Evaluation

I presumed from the child's body language that my facial response to his question had disappointed him. I could only assume he felt I had made a judgement about him and his family and their circumstances. He looked down at the table, had heavy shoulders and avoided eye contact, characteristics described by (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002), regarding the self-conscious emotion of shame. I wanted to quickly resolve the situation so I opened myself out and improved my posture, applying non-verbal communication techniques as explained by Kostelnik *et al.*, (2014) in order to demonstrate that I was relaxed, deliberately trying to be more thoughtful and considered, enabling us to be more effective in communicating. Kostelnik *et al.*, (2014), also advise to regain eye contact, smile and to speak with a soft tone when re-establishing a connection with a child. I asked him open questions, not to pry or be obtrusive but to indicate to him that his brother's location was not something I disapproved of and to reopen lines of communication. This appeared to relax him enough to answer me and contribute his number of siblings to the groups tally. I have worried since that day though that I may have spoiled that young boy's experience of the workshop, that I may have been another person who judged him on the actions of his brother. However, reflection and reading on this has taught me that as Howe (2008), reiterates, staying alongside the child and further engaging him in conversation, afforded the boy a sense of social inclusion rather than exclusion, and that he again felt of value, and his voice worthy of my attention.

The child and I moved on in our conversation and with the session but there had undoubtedly been a moment of awkwardness and embarrassment. I mentioned it to the participation officer I was with between the sessions, she had not heard the question from the boy, nor the conversation that followed and did not express any concern when I informed her that I had potentially responded inappropriately. From her feedback, I was happy to continue the day

and the child high-fived me on his way out of the classroom along with his classmates, reassuring me that he felt comfortable again.

Analysis

Analysing this situation on my way home, in my written journal that evening and later on within reflection, has provided me with three different perspectives. At the time, my feelings were of irritation that I had let my guard down and had become so relaxed in the atmosphere that I let my feelings show. Later on that day I worried that I might have contributed to the child's feelings of shame with the potential for him to hide his brother's imprisonment in future, and on writing reflectively I realise I need to revisit some older safeguarding training on how a professional practitioner should respond when a child discloses something of a nature that may affect an emotional reaction. Despite this not being a disclosure of abuse from a child, I believe the same theoretical approaches apply when children reveal aspects of their life at home which may cause concern. Hobart and Frankel (2009), describe certain skills required within safeguarding frameworks, among which, are being aware of your body language and non-verbal messages you may be communicating, as well as being aware of your reactions and mindful of how you respond to a conversation. This combined with an academic hypothesis to facial expression in response to emotions elicited, by authors such as Burkland et al., (2007), whose research concludes that a facial demonstration of disapproval is an indication of a negative evaluation of socially undesirable information, creates a case for reflection and an improvement in practice. Maintaining a reflective journal in terms of my academic experiences has increased my awareness of Schon's (1983), principles on transferring reflection on action into reflection in action relating Thompson and Thompson's (2018), theories that in-action and on-action are cyclical. I now realise that the disappointment or disapproval I may have shown was for a system that allows the child sibling of an incarcerated man to question if they remain brothers. This experience has taught me the importance of child protection skills within a safeguarding policy and how these skills can be applied in practice with children.

Conclusion

I do not think I could have done anything else given the circumstances but to overcome the discomfort and continue with the day, however, I could have responded in an altogether more positive way to the young boy's question. I was upset that he may have perceived my

reaction as disapproval and that I may have caused him embarrassment and shame. There are several tactics I believe I could have applied that day which may have prevented this confusion. The first one being that I should have prepared myself better for the diverse range of circumstances children find themselves in. I also believe that I should not have allowed myself to relax into the company of the children as I did, realising that it was this self-created casual atmosphere that had led me to let my professional persona slide and let personal emotion creep in.

Action plan

My action plan as prompted by Gibbs (1989), includes working on transferring my skills from previous learning to my current academic endeavours. I have been trained to use an impassive expression in previous roles and have used the skills well up until now within practice. This will require some updating of skills. Local authority safeguarding training that I have arranged has been postponed in light of coronavirus, however, I have done some reading and online learning regarding hiding emotional traits and maintaining a poker face as this will be required in child-advocate partnerships. Next time, on the way to a placement, I will consider in greater detail the diversity of the circumstances I am entering and giving the day far more professional consideration rather than just focusing on my nerves and what was expected of me.

Experience 3

Description

The last experience I would like to reflect on using the Gibbs (1998) model is the abrupt ending to the placement within the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC), and the disappointment in the reduction of placement hours available in which to turn around my experiences. Guidance from the government to close down schools, universities and workplaces was rapidly gaining pace and March 23rd, 2020 saw the UK officially locking down. Anything less than essential work or health-related activities was banned under the new *Coronavirus Act 2020* and the *Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020*. This gave UK governments emergency powers to manage different aspects of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Feelings

I think it is fair to say, at the time, there was a global feeling of uncertainty. The societal aspects we take for granted daily were under threat, for example, healthcare, education, business, jobs, trade, and food supply. I was glad to see lockdown commence and have some clarity on the confusing messages coming from the various government sources. However, amidst the comfort of my family being safe at home together brought the realisation that my second year of university had been concluded without finishing the hours of placement required by the module. There were no other options to be considered, staff, students and placement facilitators were all in the same situation, with an unknown outcome. I wrote at the time I felt disappointed. I was already mildly dissatisfied with the way my placement was going and now I was not going to have the chance to finish it let alone turn the experience around to suit me better. I had begun to feel like I was not having the balanced experience I had wanted or expected to have. I felt I was getting a one-sided, sugar-coated experience of children's rights and participation but not an insight into the adversities that children, young people, and those that provide their care and support, face. Writing again six weeks later, my feelings are more of irritation and resentment of missed opportunities to shadow the staff from the OCC alongside relief that actually I didn't need to have to assert my feelings about the placement not going as I had anticipated. Slightly preceding the closure of universities and the placement ending, I had requested to spend a day with the Investigations and Advice team within the commissioner's office. This request was accepted by the team and by the

commissioner herself, however, declined by the line manager for reasons of confidentiality. Whilst I understood the ethical dilemmas faced, this decision disillusioned me. I felt underestimated in my endeavour to understand child welfare, to be professional in terms of safeguarding and confidentiality and that my determination to professionally clarify the role of the children's commissioner's officers was unnecessary.

Evaluation

The ending of the placement due to the Coronavirus pandemic induced lockdown was extremely unfortunate, however, it was an aspect of life that was uncertain and one that was not able to be controlled. Community Care (2020), reported on the impact of lockdown on social care students, citing the biggest concern was that of placements being cancelled or postponed as workplaces and providers responded to the requirements to work from home, and while the primary concern remained to individual well-being, UWTSD was forced to approve that a reduction in placement hours due to coronavirus was acceptable in terms of completing the module in its amended University Student Placement Guidance (2020). Positive aspects of the situation in modern society were being able to stay home and stay safe, also to be able to keep in touch with the commissioner by email, however, negative points were lack of placement hours on which to reflect, not having a chance to build better relationships with people I had met and not having an occasion to collect much feedback on my time with the commissioner and her teams which I would have been interested to receive. Boud and Molloy, (2013), write that the importance of feedback is to enable individuals to evaluate their own work, have information on which to reflect on, and create opportunities to identify strengths and weaknesses in practice. I did not get the opportunity to realise the full importance of each working team, nor did I have a chance to say goodbye to people or thank the hosts for the opportunity. Hargie (2010), clarifies my need for closure stating that an individual who is heavily influenced by first impressions, goal planning, and focused interactions, needs to bring an encounter, either personal or professional to an end in an organised and prepared manner.

Analysis

I think that my request to spend a day with the advice and investigations team would have been granted had I made a better effort to chat with the line manager more often and share a little about myself and the reasons why I wanted to do so. I think had I made an opportunity to speak with him directly and to explain my want for a more balanced insight, he may well have been more forthcoming with allowing it as, I would never be likely to come into future contact with any telephone callers or to know names concerning issues brought forward, and I could have discussed confidentiality with him in more detail allowing him to explain his concerns and me offer reassurance that I was able to link the organisational policies on confidentiality and safeguarding to the practice, that I was familiar with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2020), which the officers in the investigation and advice team follow, and that in adherence to the OCC's Handling of Personal Information Policy (nd), I was aware of the need for all information to be anonymised.

Concerning coming to terms with the premature ending of the placement and the disappointment felt in terms of its impact on me or what I felt I could contribute, I have met any negative feeling with the concept of gratitude. This is a consistent approach in my attitude to life so while my reflections may be interpreted as negative reactions or pessimistic examples of practice, this approach allows me the opportunity to give greater reflection. To me, gratitude is not the reciprocal attitude that Roberts and Telech (2019), explain, with a 'person reflecting back the same evaluative content as the attitude of which they are the object of', moreover, a reactive attitude as defined by McKenna and Russel (2008) who write that gratitude is an appreciation towards what has benefited us in some way or for circumstances that in comparison to others, we are thankful for.

Conclusion

I had excellent opportunities with the OCC, however, it has taken considerable time and thought to admit that it was not the placement I expected it to be, and that despite the excitement and enthusiasm for the opportunities offered, and the enjoyment and insight they provided me with, that actually I am disappointed with its conclusion both in terms of the placement as a whole and the abrupt ending of it. While there are not any changes that I could make to change the circumstances of COVID-19 and its international impact, there are several changes I would make in relation to experience building and skill enhancement. A continuation in shadowing the OCC would not be practical after lockdown ends, therefore, that is not something I will be pursuing, however, I was also offered at interview, a volunteer

position with a separate child advocacy organisation whilst looking for placement opportunities and despite the safeguarding training being postponed I have been matched with a young boy in local authority care and will commence becoming his independent visitor after the lockdown restrictions have been lifted. This will continue to develop my skills as well as increase my professional knowledge. I have learnt that despite wanting a placement entrenched within positive change for children and child welfare, my skills are better suited to children themselves and not the structures defending them.

Action plan

In future, I will give more consideration to where to position myself professionally. This opportunity to reflect has given me a new perspective on my motivation to create positive change for children. Some work going forward will be to reassess whether I desire to be a change-maker or a supporter of change, and whether I am best positioned with children who I am able to establish relationships with quicker and more comfortably than I am with adults. I plan to make an appointment with the careers and employment services when universities reopen to support some consideration of my options. An aspect that I will change in my future practice is the speed in which I build connections with those around me, this experience has brought to my attention that I do not adapt quickly to more formal situations and that has limited my interaction and relationship building within professional teams. As a result of the abrupt ending to the placement, I will not have the ongoing professional relationships that I assumed a placement of this nature would normally have allowed for. I also believe that the abrupt ending, the lack of time spent, and impaired relationship building restricted the view of my best self. This is something I will endeavour to overturn within my next experience of practice.

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