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# Practising for social work practice: Integrating knowledge and skills for social work with children and families

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## ABSTRACT

The UK Government has categorically stated in its Knowledge and Skills Statement for Children and Family Social Work (DfE 2014) what social workers need to know and be able to do when responding to concerns about children. The Hope for Children and Families modular systemic interventions programme provides evidence informed responses for targeting harmful parenting and the associated impairment of children. The training resources, developed by Bentovim et al (2013), apply the 'common elements approach' (Chorpita et al 2005, Barth et al 2011,) and are aimed at qualified practitioners. However there also appears to be scope for their use in social work qualifying programmes. This paper will review the development of an undergraduate children and families module using the materials. It discusses how these resources were incorporated into a learning, teaching and assessment strategy which aims to develop and test the interpersonal components of knowledge and skills alongside technical/procedural knowledge. The outcomes indicate that these resources have contributed significantly in closing the gap between study and practice by providing an applied starting point from which learners can critically engage in the complexities of what they need to know and be able to do to be effective practitioners. Further use of these resources across programmes is recommended.

**Keywords:** Knowledge and skills, child protection practice, engagement outcomes, systemic interventions, curriculum development

## Introduction

The Hope For Children and Families (HfCF) training resources adopt a 'best evidence' approach, a methodology developed from the work of Chorpita et al (2005) and Barth et al (2011) which distils 'common practice elements' from outcome research studies to provide a menu of 'developmental' resources. These can be adapted to the practitioner's requirements to inform assessment, analysis and action as well as informing effective 'targeted'

interventions that match the needs of the family context in which potential harm, including child maltreatment, has occurred (Bentovim 2015). In operationalising this approach the dimensions of the Framework for the Assessment of Children In Need and their Families (Department of Health 2000), which is well established in UK practice, informs and maps seven stages 'of recognition, assessment, analysis and intervention' alongside this, whilst intervention modules address a range of practice themes. Included within these are suggested scripts and activities which utilise psychoeducation, cognitive behavioural, systemic and solution focused approaches. These resources therefore share many commonalities with other systemic practice models, including Signs of Safety (Turnell & Edwards 1999) and Reclaiming Social Work (Goodman & Trowler 2012). However the HfCF approach appeared to offer particular scope as a learning resource for exploring the application to practice of a range of theories and models in preference to applying a formalised business model. A critical feature of HfCF is its intrinsic encouragement to develop a critical stance among practitioners, towards evidence from research as well as evidence in an individual case. This avoids fitting the family to the model and challenges some of the consequent negativity towards families that has been associated with reliance on formal tools (Holland 2011)

In integrating the 'common elements' approach into the context of social work education and practice, Barth et al (2013) recognise that social workers commonly practice within non-speciality settings (including generalist child welfare) in which specific treatment protocols are not fully manualised. Social workers frequently manage issues related to mental health, for example, along with a range of co-occurring problems. They therefore argue that social workers need tools that are easily applied across a wide range of practice contexts. In considering the context of social work practice further, it is also recognised that social workers operate in crisis orientated situations in which the number of contacts with service users may be limited (Barth et al 2013). Presenting issues keep the full intervention from being used and underlying issues remain unaddressed, thus reducing the likelihood of success. On this basis the common elements approach is promoted as a framework offering the practitioner 'a general set of intervention elements' which increase the likelihood of effectiveness (Barth et al 2013). This addresses the often described 'eclectic' approach to practice in which social workers draw from a number of interventions without a coherent evidence base, whilst also offering scope for creative and reflexive responses. An additional aspect of the common elements approach with particular relevance and utility for addressing a critical area of children and families social work extends its application to address two problem areas; 'engagement' and 'placement prevention'. These two areas provide a compelling foundation on which to build a curriculum for teaching evidence based knowledge and skills which prepares learners for the practice realities of children and families social work. These realities will be considered below.

Research undertaken by Birmingham City Council (2014) into parents' and families' experience of the Child Protection process found that social work practice overly focusses on 'monitoring and process'. Families feel disempowered, judged and unclear about what is required of them alongside a lack of practical support and a poor relationship with the social worker. Home visits were perceived by parents as a monitoring exercise, suggesting that

visits lacked structure and purpose, and were often missed opportunities for 'more meaningful interactions'. Shortfalls were also identified in the utility of child protection plans, reflecting the findings of the Anytown Neglect Study (Horwath 2013) that plans remained undeveloped, lacked clarity and detail and failed to support the 'meaningful engagement' of both the family and involved professionals. Further to this, in reviewing research evidence and practice learning concerning indicators of neglect and risk factors, Brandon et al (2014) highlight prevailing assumptions or 'mind-sets' of professionals which prevent indicators of neglect being acknowledged and acted upon. These include a fear about being judgemental, overly focussing on the parent's needs, failure to consider the child's experience, fixed views about the family, the potential for false compliance of parents and the practitioner's lack of confidence in assessment, decision making and referring concerns. These practice realities highlight the persisting concern accentuated by the Munro Review of Child Protection (DfE 2011) of an over-bureaucratic, standardised child protection system constraining professional judgments and direct practice with families.

The main barriers to meaningful direct practice, importantly parental engagement and participatory decision making, are well understood. These include parents' fears that their child will be removed from their care and the practitioner's dual role of ensuring safety for the child versus supporting the family to overcome problems. This barrier is most prominent at the initial contact stage and Shreiber et al (2013) argue that successful engagement at the initial stage of assessment can 'set the stage' for more collaborative relationships to follow. Success at this stage is contingent on the worker's competence, in 'knowing what to do' to navigate them through the crisis period. It is suggested that competence with procedures and assessment tools is one element, with the worker's behaviours and skills being an equally important second element. These include respecting parents' views, communicating honestly and openly, and exploring strengths as well as needs (Schreiber et al 2013). Darlington et al (2010) highlight the association between helping parents gain an understanding of their child's needs and their increased capacity for decision making. It is also argued that participation is shaped by the nature of child welfare contexts being 'a dynamic, complex, multi-level and highly emotional phenomenon'. This suggests that time spent with students developing micro-level inter-personal communication skills required in the process of relationship building with families is essential for developing effectiveness in the learner, as well as acknowledging the propensity of current child welfare systems to constrain cooperation and undermine parental capacities.

In considering continuing engagement through each stage, which includes ongoing commitment, cooperation and adherence (Staudt et al 2012); further understanding is required of the relationship of parent and worker engagement to outcomes. Gladstone et al (2012) argue that engaged clients are more likely to experience positive outcomes. Two-way positive feedback validates that progress is being made and a sense of hope is gained. In contrast a less engaged client indicates that the intervention is not working and that different approaches and strategies are required. This suggests that the pro-active case management approaches promoted by HfCF, which include resources for discussing problems and for goal formulation centred on child safety, can be utilised in teaching. These resources also offer

scope for critically exploring the application of explanatory developmental models, including Attachment (Bowlby 1997) and Neurobiology (McCroy et al 2010). This is particularly relevant in light of an emerging concern discussed in Featherstone et al (2014) that such models are uncritically applied in practice, are being cited as evidence of irreversible harm and are substituting evidence drawn from a dialogue with the family.

## **Designing a children and families module**

The UK Government's, recently developed, statement of Knowledge and Skills for Child and Family Social Work (DfE 2014) sets out what a child and family social worker should know and be able to do. It is intended to inform a test of early career practitioners and it is also suggested that it will inform the initial education of student social workers. However there is a significant challenge for educators in delivering such a range of knowledge and skills within a generic undergraduate programme, to a cohort of learners with such a broad range of learning and development needs. There is also a challenge in identifying the extent and depth that is required at each stage of learning given that the statement is written with the qualified practitioner in mind. It does however offer a framework for more meaningful and integrated practice and potentially an outline teaching curriculum for child and family social work. As a framework, it can provide a continuous learning experience from student to Assessed Supported Year in Employment and beyond. This article does not attempt to address the current arguments as to whether child and family social work training should be delivered in isolation from adult social work, other than to say that materials provided within the HfCF approach has valuable learning and skills development for all areas of social work practice. This particularly relates to the application of theory in practice. In the example described below, the teaching took place alongside a companion module on practice with adults so that the learning from HfCF could be reflected in the teaching on work with adults.

Initial interest in the materials came from their introduction in a partnering local authority. Following a fundamental review of course delivery, it was agreed to trial some elements of the materials in an existing module with a group of final year students, before introducing it fully in a newly validated undergraduate module, Social Work Practice with Children, Young People and Families. It was delivered to second year undergraduate students on the BA Social Work Programme during semester 2 of the 2014/15 academic year. The outline module descriptor was operationalised to incorporate the HfCF resources as well as the teaching and learning approaches (discussed below) that would maximise student learning, taking into account their limited practice experience.

The module aimed to:

- enable the development of specialist knowledge, including legal and policy frameworks;
- apply theories and research relevant to social work practice with children and families;

- consolidate learning from the first placement and prepare for the second placement.

The module learning outcomes were:

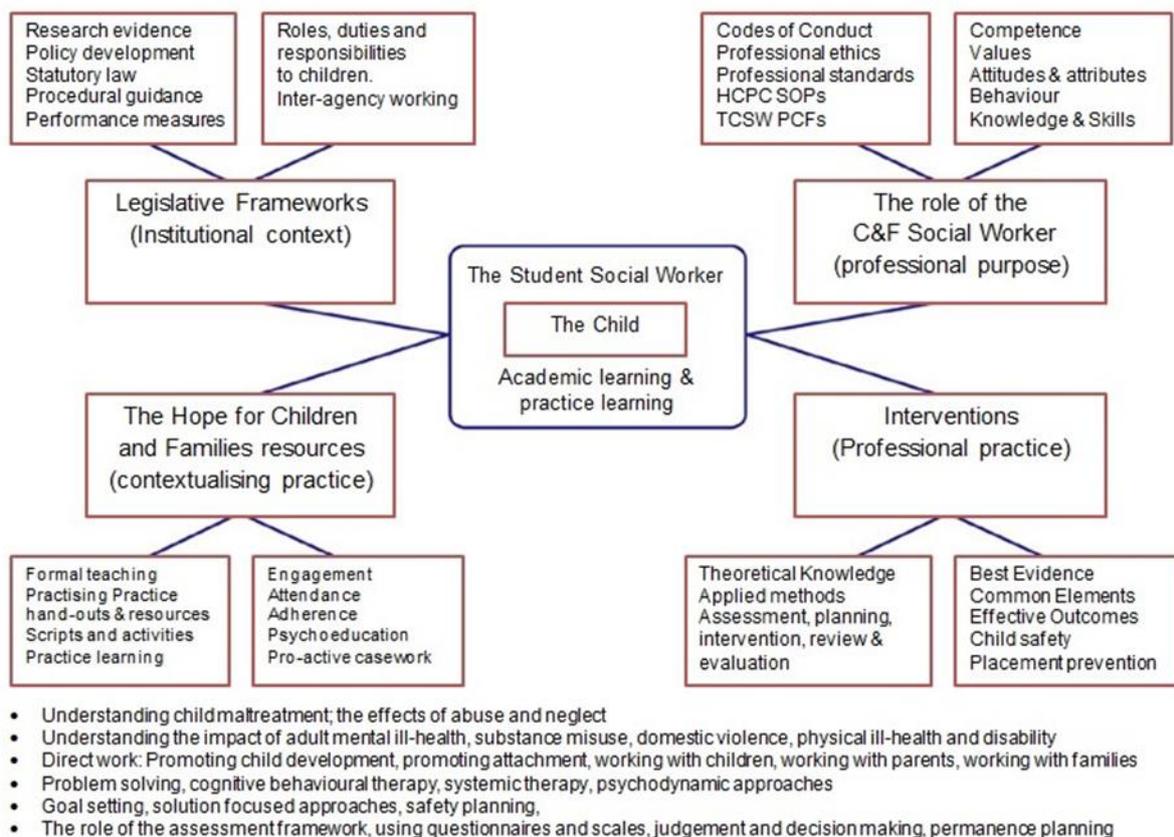
- Explain and apply the legal and policy frameworks for social work practice with children, young people and families
- Evaluate the relevance of key psychosocial theories, models of intervention and concepts of evidence based practice to your skills when working with children, young people and families
- Summarise and apply essential aspects of models of assessment, planning, intervention and review/evaluation as appropriate
- Integrate concepts of values, ethics and anti-oppressive practice in working with children, young people and families

During the previous semester students have undertaken their first practice learning experience; a seventy day placement in a social work setting. Classroom based learning then resumes in semester two. Watson and West (2010) provide a useful model of professional learning based on Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) five stages from 'novice' to 'expert'. They suggest that on return to academic learning after first placement the student moves to stage 3 'the advanced beginner'. At this stage the student is beginning to integrate contextual professional knowledge and this raises practice dilemmas for students as "the solutions to problems no longer seem straightforward" (Watson and West 2010 p147). This suggests an opportunity to engage learners in exploring their own interpretations of practice experiences as a starting point for questioning the knowledge base for professional practice. It also suggests an opportunity to shift learners from a 'surface' approach to a 'deeper' learning approach. O'Neil (1995 p117) defines the surface approach as "an attempt to complete in a minimal way the task requirements so as to maximise the rewards of learning", usually the grade given by the teacher. In contrast students who adopt a deep approach interact with the subject to make sense of its content and seek meaning. A learning and teaching theory developed by Meyer and Land (2006) and discussed by Foote (2012) refers to the 'threshold concept' as an area of 'troublesome knowledge' that is difficult for students to understand. These are often specific conceptual areas which have the potential to transform learning and bind understanding of the subject in a coherent way. In applying this it is recognised that integrating theory and practice and critical reflection represent two significant threshold concepts in social work education requiring deeper learning through the critical engagement of the student. The application of this approach in social work education is discussed in detail by Morgan (2012) who finds engaging students in interrogating 'threshold concepts and 'troublesome knowledge' 'extremely useful' for progressing learning and development beyond 'mimicry' and 'ritualised performances'. The assessment for the module aligned well with these objectives, being a viva examination, based on a case study, together with a written critical review of knowledge and skills. Both tasks required the application of theories and models of intervention, as well as critical analysis and reflection on the student's own development.

The first stage in operationalising the module descriptor was a concept mapping exercise (Fig 1 below) which identified key conceptual themes relating to professional standards as prescribed by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), The College of Social Work (TCSW) and lately by the Department for Education (DfE). Lester (2013) suggests that competence frameworks constitute two broad perspectives:

- 1: Individual attributes including the properties of competencies (eg skills, knowledge, behaviours, attitudes) a person has, enabling them to act competently across contexts.
- 2: Activity or outcome based models largely concerned with performing to an expected standard.

These two perspectives could also be viewed as 'critical engagement' and 'performance', with the former being a threshold concept which is crucial to the latter in terms of social work practice described by Clarke (2006 p3) as an "enterprise imbued with moral purpose and values and not merely a technical expertise". This presents the nature of this challenge discussed below.



**Figure 1.** Concept map for a children and families module

The second stage was to develop a module delivery plan (Table 1 below). This was based on the concept map, and incorporated learning and teaching resources drawn from the HfCF resources as well as current literature, including books, web based resources, journal articles

and research reports The module was delivered over ten weeks with each week consisting of a key note lecture followed by group seminars. Additional reading was provided with the intention being that the student would engage in a more in depth exploration of the theories and models that underpin current practice.

A further development was that of ‘Practising Practice’ activities intended to encourage students to apply and critique resources as well as to peer review developing skills. These activities were developed through recognition that student learners have limited opportunities in the classroom for ‘immediate or concrete experiences’, as expressed in Kolb’s (1984) four stages of the learning cycle. Having returned from practice learning, students would have already negotiated the four stages in Kolb’s cycle and would now be within the continuous cycle of integrating all four modes of learning. Therefore the aim of the Practising Practice activities was to maintain this cycle by giving students resources to try out, practice and modify potential 'scripts' that they felt comfortable to use with a range of situations. Schon’s (1983) perspectives on the place of “technical rationality” in professional knowledge also informed the activities with the aim of developing critical reflection on the sources of social work knowledge. His concept of ‘tacit knowing in action’ (Bruce 2013) was utilised to support learners in critically interrogating their application of knowledge and skills. Practising Practice activities were undertaken during seminars and additional activities were provided for students to try out with each other more informally. The format of the activities involved groups of three, each student adopting different roles; the practitioner, the service user or the observer. Suggested activities and scripts were provided and learners were encouraged to pro-actively undertake the activity, with minimal preparation, rather than to say what they would do. The observer’s role was to prompt them to articulate their learning and understanding while providing peer support and feedback. Ideally there would be time for students to experience each of these roles for each activity. Where time did not permit this students were able to share the differently nuanced insights gained from their role.

**Table 1.** Module delivery plan

Session content	Topics	HfCF resources	Practicing Practice
1: Introduction	Assessment, analysis, planning interventions and measuring outcomes to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.  The common elements approach  Using the assessment framework to map interventions	Preparatory reading:  Introduction:	Guidance for practitioners in discussing various forms of child maltreatment with families  Discussing with families the benefits of working with the practitioner  helping families to recognise possible effects of the impact of abusive and neglectful parenting on children's presentations
2: Promoting engagement and hope – setting	Initial stages  Engagement goals/Goal setting	Modules: Initial stages of work: engagement and	Establishing intervention goals with the family

goals  Child protection processes	Safety planning and making an agreement  Socratic/circular questioning  Using a solution focussed approach	hope	Providing an overview of areas to be addressed by the practitioner  Developing a family safety plan
3: Psychoeducation: working with abuse and neglect	Sequencing of Brain development  Toxic Stress  the impact of abuse on development  Decision making within a child's timeframe	Working with parents: Targeting abusive and neglectful parenting	Recognising possible effects of the impact of abusive and neglectful parenting on children's presentations  The developing brain - developing sufficient understanding to be able to share this with parents
4: Working with Parents: Using Questionnaires and Scales	Parenting Capacity  Using developmental charts  Parents coping with stress and the link with parenting capacity /Sources of Stress	Video: the Bradshaws	Child development: Birth to 10 years  What seems to influence children's development  Children's developmental needs and how to promote them  Developmental chart
5: Targeting problems – intervention models	Working with parents to provide good quality parenting and dealing with stress    Problem solving skills	Video: The Wards  Table of concerns and agreed goals	Changing parental perceptions of children's behaviour  Exploring situational stressors  Exploring emotional relationships between parents and children:  Reviewing the last 24 hours
6: Working with Children	Emotional, behavioural and developmental impairments associated with abusive and neglectful parenting  Working collaboratively with the child  Working in partnership with a supportive parent	Working with children: emotional and traumatic responses	Getting to Know Me/ More about me  Body map/Ways to feel better  Feelings thermometer/Identifying feeling states  thinking-feeling-doing  Wheel of Life
7: Working with Families, Systemic Practice	Understanding the family as a system  The family assessment model of family functioning  The role of conflict/Dysfunctional relationships  The function of the practitioner	Modules: Working with Families	Work required before and after meetings between the victim and perpetrator    Mapping informal and formal support

	within the system  Understanding Authority and power		Promoting healthy family functioning, family communication and problem solving skills
8: Analysis and Decision making  Public Law processes. Court applications	Presenting evidence and analysing information  Using a genogram and chronology  analysis using the assessment framework Systematic Analysis of patterns of harm and protection	Case-Specific Information Record with guidance Notes	Table of concerns and agreed goals  Helpful techniques to manage conflict and dysfunction in family life
9: Supporting transitions and permanence  Duties toward looked after children	Focus on work with Michael and Laura	Modules: working with disruptive behaviour: Problems of children and young people	The Good Lives Model  Analysing incidents;  Thinking which justifies angry behaviour;  Assertiveness training
10: module review	Models of critical reflection		

### ***The Assessment***

The main mode of assessment was a fifteen minute individual oral presentation based on a case scenario provided to the students. In addition to this a short written reflection was required, this being a critical review of continuing personal and professional development needs requiring students to evaluate their skills development when working with children, young people and families.

In reviewing the case scenario and in preparing their presentation students were asked to consider the following:

- The statutory law and the processes and procedures outlined in practice guidance that will inform and guide the intervention.
- The important judgements and decisions that will be required at each stage.
- An analysis of the children's development needs and how the issues and concerns highlighted might have impacted on the children.
- Safety planning for the children based on harm and likely future harm
- The sources of stress within the family that might have impacted on parenting capacity.

- The sources of hope within the family which indicate how the practitioner will promote engagement and adherence with plans and actions

Students were not required to incorporate the HfCF resources into their presentations but the assessment specifically required them to justify and evaluate the relevance of key psychosocial theories, models of intervention and evidence based practice applied to the case study .

## **Feedback and Evaluation**

The findings, reported below, were drawn from ongoing feedback obtained from students during seminar sessions and a semi structured group interview facilitated after the assessment activities was completed, which was attended by five students on a voluntary basis. Examples from the students' submissions were also used to demonstrate their understanding and application of key concepts relating to the module learning outcomes. To avoid any possible conflict of interest all student participants were advised that the evaluation was not a test of their knowledge and their participation would in no way influence their grades. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time. No other negative consequences of participation were envisaged and only basic demographic data was collected. All reporting of results is anonymised to ensure confidentiality for the participants.

### ***Student feedback***

The students who participated in the group interview were unanimously positive regarding the HfCF materials. An important theme that developed during the discussion was the bridge between theory and practice, in particular how the approach appeared to better reflect how the students preferred to learn.

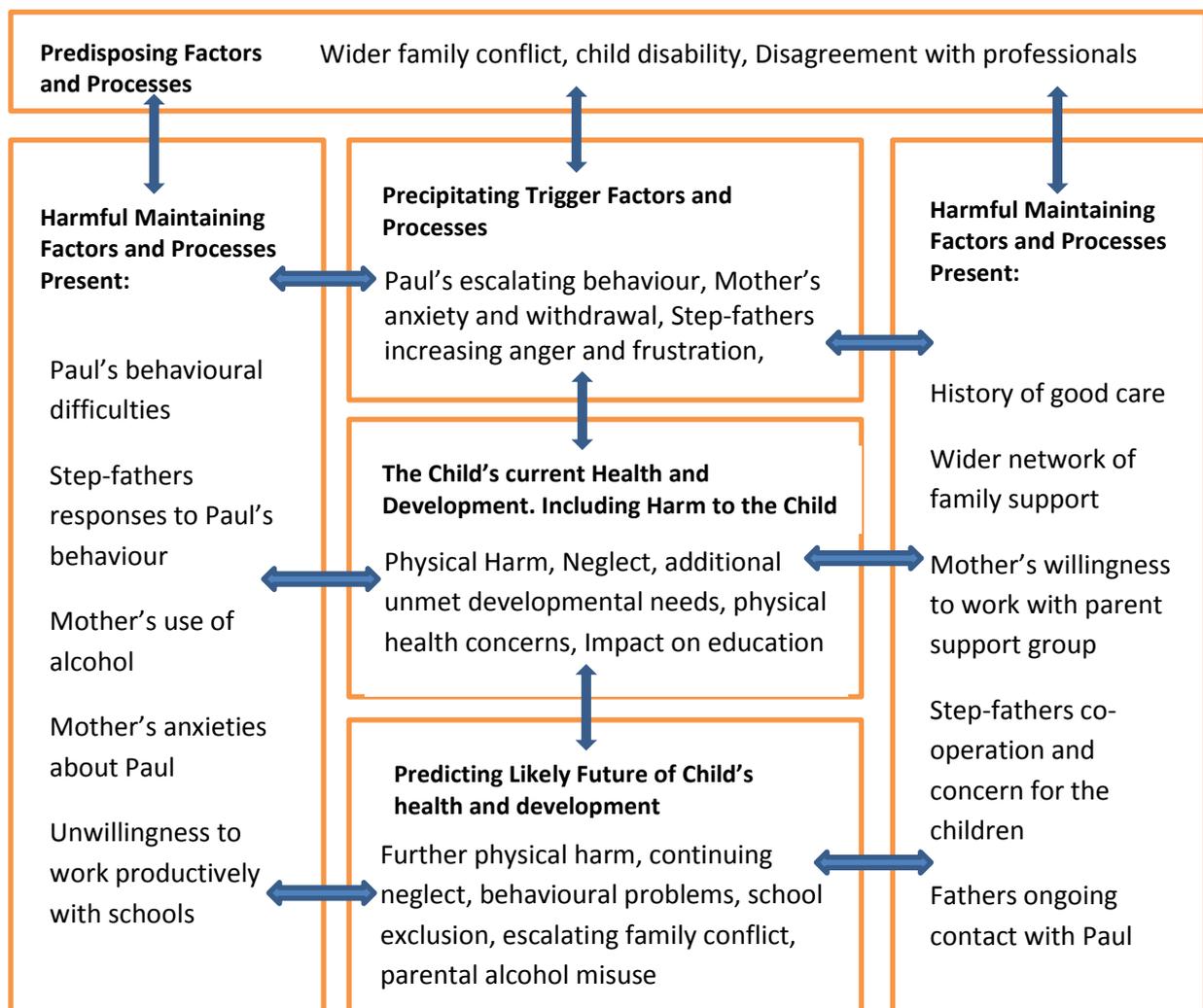
*“If you go straight to the academic it doesn't sink in so if you have an understanding of where you are coming from you have some clue what you are learning about”*

This suggests that learners appreciated an applied overview of a practice approach with specific resources that incorporated evidence based models, enabling them to then access more complex academic material.

*“It is a common starting point and although you wouldn't use it on its own, it is easy to understand. Some of the books are quite complicated and it helps you get your head around what you need to understand before you go into the more complicated stuff”*

It would appear that the students are suggesting that in applying theory to practice they need a starting point, this being an example of how a practice problem might be tackled which can then provide a point of reference for further reading and integration. This suggests an exemplar is required from which further learning can be applied. This differs from students reflecting and retrospectively applying theory to their own practice in that an exemplar provides for integrating and contextualising theory and research evidence.

A particularly good example of this is a submission by a male student who evidently engaged with additional reading to develop a more critical understanding of practice. His presentation critiqued actions and decisions in the case scenario through a discussion of linear and circular processes of analysis (Bentovim et al 2009). He was able to articulate an analysis of the compounding effects of a rigid, process driven intervention, which required the step-father to leave the family home, after injuring his step son (who had a learning disability) when restraining him. This had led to family breakdown, neglect of the children (attributed to mother's depression) and a breach of contact arrangements causing the children to be placed in foster care and a care application by the local authority. By using the 'Systemic Framework' (Bentovim & Child and family Training 2013) which looks at pre-disposing, precipitating, protective and risk factors a clear analysis was provided predicting likely future outcomes if the situation remained unchanged (Figure 2 below). This prefaced a proposed plan for each child which included direct work aimed at improving family functioning, utilising the HfCF resources, themes included communication and problem solving, managing conflict and support networking.



**Figure 2.** An example of student systemic analysis of the case scenario

An analysis of the Students' critical reviews indicates four common themes for their ongoing development needs: knowledge of legislative frameworks, direct practice, professional confidence and inter-professional working. It was apparent that students perceived their own development as a combination of applied technical, instrumental knowledge (concerned with applying legislation, practice guidance and defined models for practice) and applied insight drawn from wider theoretical knowledge and skills development. A common word linked to development was 'confidence' including developing confidence in;

- having difficult conversations 'being sharper and more tactful';
- age appropriate communication skills with children;
- recognising challenging and complex situations;
- engaging families;
- leading on interventions and in challenging other professionals;
- promoting service user's participation in decision making;
- and applying systemic approaches.

Many students recognised that their own traits can interfere with effectiveness and raised some concerns around such issues as; separating out personal and professional values, managing own emotions, becoming defensive and their own resilience. This suggests that the majority of learners remained anxious about applying academic learning. It also highlights that the 'practicing practice' exercises are not an end in themselves and real life practice has to be experienced to fully try out and reflect on newly acquired skills.

Overall the critical reviews demonstrated an awareness of being more critically engaged with practice and the need to self audit their own capacity to apply knowledge. Many expressed a realisation that their knowledge of psychosocial models of child development was limited and it suggested a realisation that children and families social work required a much deeper integration of the skills and knowledge (as highlighted in figure 1 above). This was exemplified by one student who candidly stated '*it worries me that I am not as knowledgeable as I thought*'. This raises significant questions for the pace of social work education as well as for the curriculum itself. Foundational learning, balancing the concept of evidence based practice with developing criticality, requires space and time.

### **Limitations**

It is acknowledged that this is the first delivery of a new module and that the incorporation of this approach and the use of the HfCF resources require further development. Therefore this initial evaluation can only indicate the utility of new approaches. It is also acknowledged that what is taught to student social workers needs to reflect the practice models that are being incorporated by the providers of children and families services and that the application of newly acquired knowledge and skills can only be effective if it is transferable to the practice context and the professional requirements of these. While there are costs associated with the large scale implementation of new models, the principles of the practice in the HfCF model

are applicable across the range of approaches currently being implemented in many practice settings, as well as within the development of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE).

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper has discussed the development and delivery of a specialist children and families module taught in the second year of an undergraduate social work degree programme. Innovative approaches including theories of learning and teaching relating to threshold theory and deeper learning have been combined with evidence based, developmental resources for practitioners to deliver a module which prepares learners with the necessary foundational skills and knowledge to develop into effective practitioners in children and families social work. An important objective has been to increase the likelihood that the student will become more engaged in the learning process and recognise that the ability to articulate their own knowledge and understanding is central to development as a critically engaged practitioner. This will, in turn, enable them to build relationships with families and pro-actively manage casework. Given the current performance driven practice environment within which children and families social work operates the integration of knowledge, skills and values in preparation for field placements is particularly important. However many students have very limited contextual experience and consequently little confidence in their capacity to retain and apply learning when confronted with the harsh reality of real world practice. Therefore one of the most important challenges for classroom based learning was to provide a substitute context for practice as a basis for knowledge development and application. The HfCF resources appear to address this gap to a considerable extent by providing both an instrumental and dialogical exemplar that promotes student praxis and maintains the momentum of the learning cycle (Kolb 1984). The student feedback suggests that the process of applying theory into practice does not fit well with linear models of teaching. Incorporating the HfCF training resources into academic teaching has enabled the students to adapt and amend their own learning approaches through the course of the module. This suggests that theory into practice is bidirectional as well as cyclical and that this approach increases the likelihood that the student social worker will know and be able to do children and families social work to the required level in their final placement.

It is acknowledged that further development of this module is required particularly in matching learning to practice developments within local authorities and voluntary sector placement providers alongside further alignment with professional competence frameworks. There remains scope for further integration of the HfCF principles and resources with learning, teaching and assessment across the social work curriculum, incorporating resources into the Masters in Social Work programme, for post qualifying learning, and in exploring potential for inter-professional learning

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