

# **'Back to our Roots? ' Re-visiting psychoanalytically-informed baby and young child observation in the education of student social workers**

## **Abstract**

While there is a well-established literature on psychoanalytically-informed baby and young child observation in social work education, little has been published recently. This paper reviews the rationale for its use, evaluating its impact on students' learning in the light of contemporary policy and practice contexts facing social work education. Analysis of feedback gained from a recent cohort, identifies three ways in which learning through baby and young child observation contributes: firstly, students encounter and learn about the complexity of child development from the direct experience of observing and secondly, observing facilitates the development of important skills for practice; students' 'use of self'. Thirdly, through observing, students describe how they develop the capacity to take-up and sustain a professional role. Well-structured teaching and learning through observation is therefore shown to provide a rigorous, theoretically- grounded contribution to the training of university-based social work students entering this complex and challenging professional field.

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**Introduction:**

It is accepted that the ability to observe is an important professional skill for a range of different disciplines (for example in teaching, early years work and psychology; Fawcett, 2009). Observation is thought to be of particular relevance to the social work profession, where it ‘underpins all social work practice and is an essential skill that practitioners need to continually develop as part of their ongoing learning’ (O’Loughlin and O’Loughlin 2015, p xiii).

This paper explores the use of a particular type of observation found in social work education; that of baby or young child observation. This kind of observation derives from an approach that has been a part of the training programme for child psychotherapists at the Tavistock Centre, since 1948.

Of the different approaches to observation ('narrative' or 'scientific', as described by Fawcett, 2009 and; Le Riche and Tanner, 1998), the model of baby and young child observation considered in this paper falls into the 'narrative' group. While there is a well-established literature on psychoanalytically-informed baby and young child observation as a teaching tool for social work (for example, Trowell and Miles 1991; Briggs, 1995; 1999; Wilson 1992), little has been published in recent years. As social work academics currently teaching psychoanalytically-informed observation, we decided, for this paper, to revisit and review the rationale for its use and to evaluate its impact on students' learning in the light of the contemporary policy and practice context of social work education, drawing on feedback gained from a recent cohort of students.

Firstly, the paper considers the contemporary policy and practice context for social work education, including the increasing emphasis on the knowledge and skills requirements designed to ensure students meet a progressive set of thresholds within the Professional Capability Framework (PCF), (The College of Social Work (TCSW), 2012) from readiness for direct practice prior to the first practice placement, through to the level required at qualification and beyond (Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) 2012). Social work educators seem stuck, at present, between a rock and hard place in relation to meeting these requirements; courses have had to comply with the enormous range and scope of both the PCF which were developed by the now closed College of Social Work and the HCPC measures, 'Standards of Proficiency'. More recently, the development of the new Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for both children and family social workers (DfE, 2014a) and adults (DoH 2015) mean that students should have the requisite knowledge and skills in these areas of practice. These newly developed KSS add a heavy emphasis on

the development of intervention skills (DfE, 2014b). It will be useful therefore to consider what psychoanalytically-informed observation has to offer in terms of helping to achieve these standards in an already packed qualifying curriculum.

Secondly, the paper sets the scene by briefly describing the origins of psychoanalytically-informed baby and young child observation, its underpinning theory and the mechanics of carrying one out during social work training. It summarises arguments, largely presented in the 90s and 2000s, which outline the benefit to students' learning of carrying out an observation of a baby and young child; centering on their child development knowledge, but also concerning professional development and reflective capacity. These latter skills were highlighted in the wake of the high profile child death inquiries that society and the profession were coping with at the time (Tanner 1998).

Thirdly, the paper then presents a qualitative evaluation of a recent cohort of students' learning from conducting a child observation, near the beginning of their training. It considers, in the subsequent analysis and discussion, whether and how observing contributes to social work students' knowledge and skills development- in particular the requirement to develop and hone intervention skills highlighted recently (DfE 2014a; DoH 2015).

Emerging from this analysis is a typology, derived from what students identified as three highly relevant areas of learning offered by observing: knowledge about human development; development of their 'use of self' and; how observation provided a prototype for professional practice (the home visit). The paper concludes that baby and young child observation does indeed remain a useful learning tool for social work students and it considers ways in which it may be extended and developed further in the future,

thus providing theoretically-underpinned, clinical or therapeutic depth to the training of social workers, laying the way for graduates to become highly skilled at undertaking relationship-based interventions (Ruch *et al*, 2010) as they progress in their careers.

### **Readiness for practice and beyond: the policy and practice context for acquiring social work skills and knowledge**

The development of a tiered framework for practice, the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (TCSW) has nine domains and describes what social work students and social workers may be expected to know and be able to do through each stage of their career. The first stage is pre-placement for first year students and is described as ‘readiness for direct practice’. Social work students must be assessed, before their first practice placement, on whether they have the necessary skills, knowledge and values to work directly with service users:

‘By the point of assessment of readiness for direct practice (prior to first placement), students should demonstrate basic communication skills, ability to engage with users, capacity to work as a member of an organisation, willingness to learn from feedback and supervision, and demonstrate basic social work values, knowledge and skills in order to be able to make effective use of first practice placement’ (TCSW 2012).

Linked to this, social work curricula must ensure that students are being assessed against the HCPC’s Standards of Proficiency for Social Work (HCPC, 2012) in England so that by the end of their training students are eligible to apply for registration with the HCPC. Following qualification, the new Knowledge and Skills Statements for child and family and adult social

work (DfE 2014a; DoH 2015) are now coming into force, setting out on-going assessment and accreditation requirements for practitioners to meet.

Social work education has come in for heavy criticism recently, particularly in relation to the training of child and family social workers. It has been suggested that some social work programmes deliver a curriculum that lacks rigour and focus on the development of intervention and practice skills, such as those set out in the two sets of KSS producing social workers who are 'care managers', rather than skilled professionals who are able to carry out direct work in complex case situations (DfE 2014b; Narey 2014).

Improving social work practice in the past, especially in child and family social work, has often focused on using scales, grids and forms (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014), resulting in criticism of practice as 'prescriptive' in form:

'Complying with prescription and keeping records has become too dominant. The centrality of forming relationships with children and families to understand and help them has become obscured' (Munro, 2011, p7).

Whilst such tools are essential for some aspects of practice, they do not develop a practitioner's sensitivity to the experiences, needs and circumstances of individual service users. There have long been debates and tussles in the social work profession over how the necessary micro skills and capacities are best developed, what constitutes knowledge and how it may be used (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). Munro (2008) discusses the futility of the profession taking either a narrowly mechanistic or a purely intuitive approach and argues that an entrenched view, 'leads to a sterile and often bitter conflict' (p1). Instead, Munro (2008) advocates practice where both subjective and objective knowledge is valued and

supported in assessing and working with service users. Munro (2008, p3) cites Hammond (1996) who argued that, 'it is more realistic to view human reasoning skills as on a continuum' as this accommodates analytic reasoning methods plus intuition and other unconscious processes.

The profession has eagerly embraced the idea of the intuition/analytic continuum as a helpful tool in day-to-day practice and there have been broader debates about the need to deliver new approaches such as when safeguarding vulnerable people, children and adults (Munro, 2011). There is little current agreement, however, on the optimal intervention approaches for practice; the DfE (2014), in relation to children's social work, set up the 'Innovations Programme' to stimulate experimentation in this area. We are suggesting in this paper that observation, which has professional engagement and relationship-building with adults and child as a central objective, may well offer an effective model to start students on the road to developing theory-based intervention skills.

The home visit, another important aspect of practice, particularly in relation to children's social work, has been examined by Ferguson (2009, 2011). He argues that there has been a significant gap in the practice literature about the experiences of social work home visits; how the individual social worker gains access, what the challenges are and how they overcome them. This paper is considering this important aspect of practice development; whether undertaking a direct observation of a child gives students a head-start in developing the experience and skills necessary during the negotiation phase to gain access, which Ferguson (2009) argues is often challenging. What we as social work academics aim to do through teaching observation, as the next section discusses, is to encourage students

to remain curious about families and how to engage in working with them, whilst developing their understanding of their own use of self and intuition (Ward 2010).

### **Brief history of baby and young child observation in social work education- why emphasise observation skills?**

Psychoanalytic observation has its origins in Esther Bick's (1964) innovation, its introduction enabling child psychotherapy trainees to gain a beginning experience of practice, before they commence clinical training. Child psychotherapy students at the Tavistock began to undertake a two-year observation with a child from birth onwards, with several aims in mind. Firstly, observing is intended to 'help the students to conceive vividly the infantile experience of the child'... but also to help them understand 'the child's non-verbal behaviour and his [sic] play, as well as the behaviour of the child who neither speaks nor plays' (Bick 1964, p558). Another dimension is that students are able to learn in the context of family life 'to observe the development of an infant more or less from birth, in his home setting and in relation to his immediate family, and thus to find out for himself how these relations emerge and develop' (Bick 1964, p558).

Baby and young child observation was introduced to social work qualifying programmes in the 1980s and 90s, after child death enquiries revealed that social workers were apparently failing to engage with the children they were attempting to safeguard (Trowell and Miles, 1991; Tanner 1998). Briggs (1995) cites Blom-Cooper (London Borough of Brent, 1985) who pointed out in relation to the death of Jasmine Beckford, the way in which the social worker 'misconceived her role':



‘She averted her eyes from the children to be aware of them only as and when they were with their parents, hardly even to observe their development, and never to communicate with Jasmine on her own’ (London Borough of Brent, 1985, cited by Briggs, 1995 p103).

Student social workers were to be introduced to observation, to address concerns raised about:

‘professional failure to keep the child ‘in mind’ whilst working with the whole family, insufficient understanding of child development and the need to improve the quality of assessment skills’ (Tanner 1998:9).

Texts published during the 1990s consider the potential of observation in social work training to assist in the development of reflective practices (for example, Trowell and Miles, 1991; Wilson, 1992; Briggs 1992; 1999; Tanner 1999). Wilson (1992) concentrates on three elements; firstly the social work student’s ability to develop an observer’s ‘stance’ which is seen as a good template for the adoption of a professional stance in working with people. Secondly, observing is seen as enabling the trainee to learn to maintain a focus on the child, whilst in the competing environment of the family. Thirdly, Wilson (1992) describes how observation can enable practitioners to ‘sharpen’ their assessment skills; helping them to learn how to build and ‘test’ hypotheses, a skill which is necessary for the developing social worker who is engaged in statutory work.

Briggs (1999) echoes these points, but emphasises also the potential of observation to help in the development of practitioners’ reflective sensibilities. Linking with Schon’s (1983) theory of professional development, observation can assist trainees in learning to move

from 'reflecting-on-action' to a state when they are also becoming able to 'reflect-in-action'. This is then related to Casement's (1985) idea that practitioners, over time, are encouraged to develop an 'internal supervisor' as a resource to call upon, enabling a flexible and thoughtful professional stance in their work with service users. Briggs (1999) also describes Tanner's (1999) important identification of the similarity between reflective practice and Bion's (1962) notion of 'reverie'. Bringing together Schon's approach to professional learning, with the experiential potential of observing, supported by a containing seminar setting where feelings can be explored, has 'transformational' potential suggests Tanner (1999, p29).

Adopting a psychoanalytically-informed approach to observing requires students to be taught within a psychodynamic paradigm. The seminar setting facilitates personal reflection so that students begin to separate out feelings that may originate from their own experience, or upbringing, from those they are likely to be picking up while observing. Although it is possible to observe using other theoretical frameworks (Fawcett 2009; Loughlin and Loughlin, 2015), our approach enables students to be immersed in a theory/practice paradigm at some depth for a qualifying programme. In particular, students become familiar with the concepts of transference and counter-transference (Sudbery, 2002). As part of this, students are encouraged to consider their own subjectivity and lived reality, via examining the assumptions they make about 'others' when observing. Observation therefore offers students an opportunity to revisit the psychodynamic roots of their profession (Froggett, Ramvi and Davies, 2015), developing proto-clinical practice or therapeutic skills, within an anti-oppressive framework.

**What is involved in carrying out a baby or young child observation?**

The authors currently teach on undergraduate and postgraduate qualifying programmes in two universities in London, running adapted, shorter, versions of the 'classic' Tavistock observation (Bick, 1964); students visit a child, under five years old, in their own home or day care setting for an hour each week, over 12 weeks.

Students have to be active in identifying a child to observe and then in explaining and negotiating how the visits will take place. Staff work closely with students on how to negotiate a space in which to observe unobtrusively. Parents and carers are provided with information, including the arrangements to ensure confidentiality, and consent forms for the observation to take place.

Observation visits are planned during term-time, supported by a weekly seminar which contains students as they get ready for and then reflect upon observations. The intention is for the student to give their full attention to observing; registering both what the child is communicating, and the feelings this evokes in them, the observer. Students learn to write detailed process recordings of the visits, writing down everything they can remember as soon as possible afterwards, with no note-taking during the visit. They do not analyse, reflect on, theorise or reference their accounts, which are, as Urwin and Sternberg (2012, p2) suggest, meant to 'have a spontaneity, even a rawness'.

Students take turns, in the small-group seminar, to read out an account of an observation and then to hypothesise on what may be going on for the child, their carers and the observer. Students are encouraged to include in their accounts not just what they see, but also how they feel during each visit. Exploration of the many possible meanings of these feelings is the central work of the seminar which includes consideration of what is evoked, by the material, in each seminar participant and in the tutor.

Whilst we positively discourage students from starting with theory, the observation sequence is informed primarily by psychoanalytic ideas as conveyed in an accompanying lecture series. Seminar discussions are likely to include reference to the concept and experience of counter-transference (Heimann, 1950; Casement, 1985), which is introduced to invite students to develop their sensitivity to the emotional dynamics they encounter. During the observation, are they particularly anxious, bored, amused or can they identify any other kind of feeling? Might this simply reflect their own state of mind, or are they possibly picking-up unconscious projections which are worth exploring in a tentative way in the seminar and over the length of the observation period?

We ask students to seek what we term an 'ordinary' child to observe; we want them to have the chance to learn about a child who does not have particular social, emotional or health issues. Appreciating how complex, even painful, the infantile experience can be is essential for close work with people at any stage in the life course. There are few opportunities for practising social workers to experience ordinary development, yet knowledge of the 'ordinary' is important, to enable a developing capacity to judge the atypical child in relation to benchmark developmental milestones. Having said this, no child is really 'ordinary' so within the seminars students are encouraged to notice and comment on the human diversity they have encountered and at the end of the process to share, in essay form, what they have understood about the individual child whom they have come to know.

### **An evaluation of students' experience of observing**

The evaluation and analysis of data was conducted at the end of the academic year with undergraduate and postgraduate students on two qualifying social work programmes. They

were given a brief module evaluation questionnaire to complete individually and anonymously once they had finished the module, their consent to taking part having been obtained. The questions were open, encouraging students to elaborate on their experiences, including: their expectations before the observations, what they found to be the key learning points whilst observing, their experience of the seminars and how they anticipated the observation would impact on their practice.

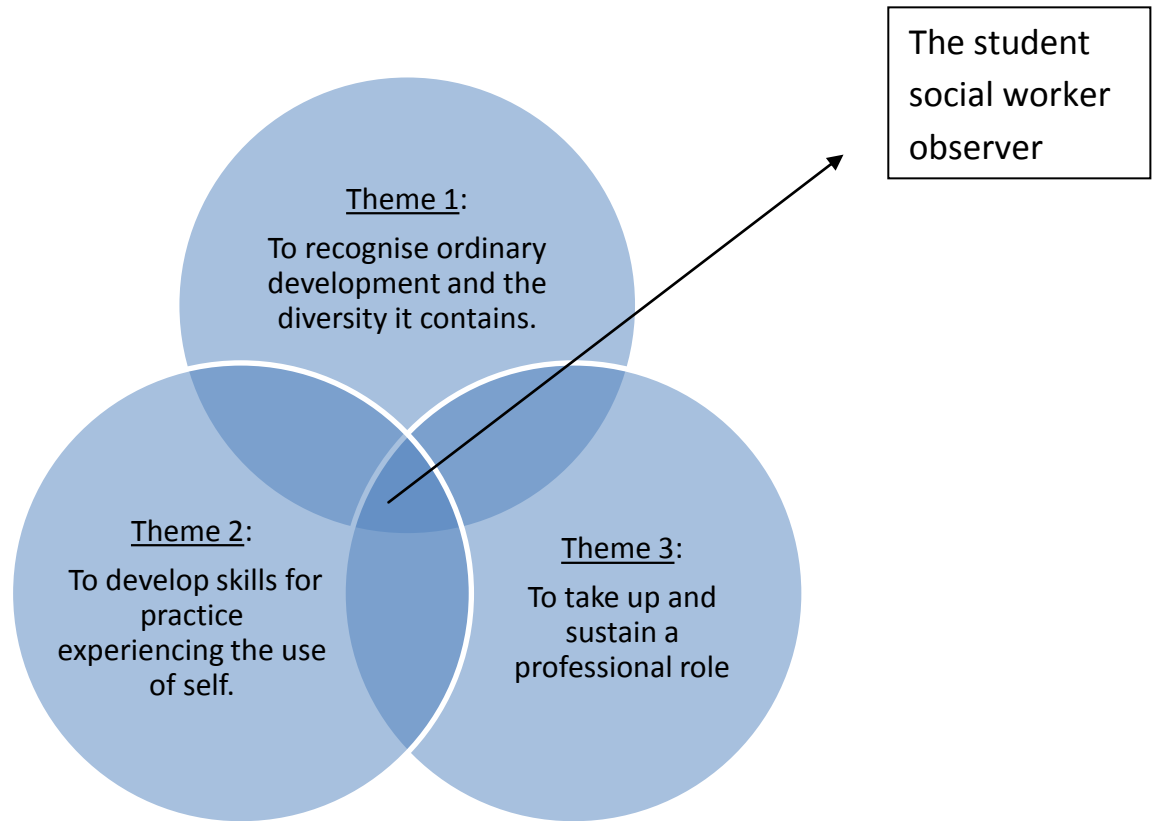
Considering the methodology, a qualitative analysis of the responses was carried out to identify emergent themes (Bryman, 2014) from the students' evaluation. These have been used to develop a simple typology which recognises three key areas of learning identified from undertaking a child observation, each with a number of sub-themes. We have placed students' own words centrally in this account, to maintain a form of data analysis characterised by a quality of 'thick description'. In this way, the study adopts an 'experience near' methodology (Geertz, 1974), consistent with others in social work research (Froggett and Briggs, 2009). The findings are presented here, followed by a discussion.

## **1. Findings**

Through carrying out a thematic analysis, a number of main themes and sub-themes emerged. The main themes were as follows:

- **Theme one:** to recognise 'ordinary' development and the diversity contained within it
- **Theme two:** to develop skills for practice: experiencing the use of self
- **Theme three:** to take up and sustain a professional role.

We have conceptualised this typology for teaching baby and young child observation to student social workers as a Venn diagram with the position of the student social worker at the centre. This is what we have found that the students say they learn:



**Fig 1. An emergent typology for teaching child observation to student social workers**

Under each of these main themes, a number of sub-themes were identified and these are represented in the table below, followed by a more detailed presentation of students' own words.

Theme One: <b>Recognising Ordinary Development</b>	Theme Two: <b>Use of Self</b>	Theme Three: <b>Development of Professional Role</b>
Sub- themes	Sub-themes	Sub-themes

a) Becoming sensitive to baby or young children's communication	a) Learning to 'bracket' personal concerns	a) Practising taking up a role within agreed boundaries
b) Feeling the impact of observing	b) Learning about reflection	b) Developing writing and presentation skills
c) Appreciating the diversity of approaches to child care	c) Seeing their impact on others	c) Learning about subjectivity
	d) The impact of the baby/young child on the observer's personal growth	d) Learning the value of 'mulling'
	e) The containing function of the seminar: a precursor to supervisory relationships	

**Theme one: Through observation students learn to recognise and become sensitive to 'ordinary' development and the diversity contained within it.**

While observing, students also attend lectures on human growth and development, reading and reflecting on the work of a range of life course theorists. Observing enables them to experience child development at first hand and then to explore their findings in seminars with others. As explained, the students are encouraged to seek an 'ordinary' child to observe. This presents students with a multi-faceted and sometimes painful encounter with

early life experience. It provides a baseline that can be drawn on as a comparator in future work with children and adults facing particular difficulties or safeguarding issues.

**Sub-themes** identified from the student evaluation were as follows:

- a) **Becoming comfortable in the company of babies and young children; sensitising themselves to their communication and learning about other children through sharing in seminars.**

Some students were able to own that they had very little experience of young children, but that they were learning. For example, two students revealed:

*'I have learnt about the development of the child which, not having children, was something I knew nothing about before' (MA 15).*

*[I gained]... 'a much better understanding of how to care for a baby of this age and what are their needs' (MA 14).*

Through observing, students showed growing awareness of the child's world as illustrated here:

*'As an observer I was able to see lots of emotions, expressions and a bit of the inside of the mind of how baby C thinks and behaves (MA 9).'*

*'...no weeks were the same. I could relate to the theory more...the child's interaction and growth' (BA 17).*

- b) **Feeling the impact of the observed child and their carers.**



Here, students recognise that they have to manage the anxiety of the new situation as an unobtrusive and non-interfering observer. The requirement is on the observer to find his/her own voice and give validity and respect to their own thoughts and feelings, conveying what may be particular about the child they observe. As two students put it:

*'I learnt that children develop in certain typical ways and if not there may be something hindering their development. The child I observed was hindered as she did not speak English at all. I learnt that my own emotions, life experiences and thoughts affect observations and others may see it differently' (BA 19).*

*'I learnt how important it is to focus on the child and just how much you can learn from observing them. What is going on for the child- their reactions, emotions and the reasons behind them. Recognised how easy it is to get drawn in by the parents and then lose sight of the child. Recognising my own emotions, guilt and how that can affect you' (MA 17).*

### **c) Appreciating the sheer diversity of approaches to child care.**

In this sub-theme, through discussing and reflecting on the observations, students report on their first-hand discoveries of the diversity of children's experiences. Cultural differences, for example, are apparent in discussion about food, bed-times, discipline, gender roles:

*'I've learnt how to watch yet remain warm and friendly so as to not alarm or discourage the child or others present. I've learnt how to pick up on what a child wants and needs and how they communicate with those around them. I've seen developmental milestones and discovered I need to work on my own attachments. I'm amazed at how clever and truly unique children are' (BA 14).*

*'Each person had different experiences to share and much was learnt' (BA 16).*

## **Theme two: Through observation students learn to develop skills for practice:**

### **experiencing the use of self**

In the data that supports the identification of this theme, social work students appear to be beginning to recognise their feelings, working out where they may come from in relation to their own personal history. We consider this work to be central for relationship-based practice, and it is our contention that the sensitive use of self is a significant outcome of the baby or young child observation. Observers are encouraged to hold back from judging; to wait, reflect, and to take account, over time, of several sources of information, and to consider ideas from other seminar participants, including being open to what they may have missed (Urwin and Sternberg, 2012).

Five sub-themes emerged in this section.

#### **a) Learning to 'bracket' personal concerns**

In order to be available for whatever is happening for the child in the observation hour, students have to put their own concerns aside and they may have to bear feeling 'intruded upon' by the observation experience. As one student put it:

*'I have learnt about different theories around child development from psychological and psychoanalytic points of view. I also learnt to be mindful of the use of self by not comparing children especially comparing with my own children as every child is unique in his or own way' (MA 5).*

#### **b) Learning about reflection**

Through managing to 'bracket' their personal concerns, students describe becoming more able to reflect on experience, as one showed:

*'It enhanced my observation and critical thinking skills. More insight into the dynamics of a family. More aware of how family crisis can impact on the emotional and psychological needs of a child' (MA 16).*

**c) Preparing for practice, seeing how personal demeanour can impact on relationships.**

Students showed growing awareness that how they behave has a direct influence on the practice situation. As one respondent says:

*'I learnt about how my role and behaviour will, whether I like it or not, affect the behaviour of the service user. How I must use myself in an effective way when engaging with service users in order to support them and build relationships' (BA 34).*

**d) The impact of the baby or young child on the observer's personal growth.**

The observation can have a significant impact on the personal growth of the students, often reminding them of their own experience as a baby or as a parent. For one student, observing:

*'Brought up emotions of wanting my own child. Powerfulness of a crying baby - how traumatic this can be. Made me think much more about how I will mother when I have a baby' (MA 14).*

**e) Learning about the containing function of the seminar and its leader.**

Under the fifth sub-theme, students considered how the seminar leader encourages them to think about how they feel in role and what they notice about the emotional world of the child:

*'I really enjoyed the seminars as we looked in-depth at our obs. Sometimes we identified things I had not seen and I was able to draw on others' experiences' (BA 3)*

*'The tutor provoked my ability to think deeper and probe the situation.'* (BA 15)

It seems clear to us that the experience of a containing seminar and leader can serve as a pre-cursor to future work-based supervision for a developing professional.

### **Theme three: Through observation students learn to take up and sustain a professional role.**

Observation can be seen to provide an introduction to the professional role in several ways.

We found four sub-themes:

#### **a) Practising taking up and sustaining a role within agreed boundaries.**

Observing involves a relationship that is not the same as that of befriending. The observer may encounter (and learn to manage) guilt and uncertainty and a sense of responsibility in taking the observer stance, as one student was able to reveal:

*'I was uncomfortable at first being the observer. The dependence children have on their care-giver was evident for me at the nursery setting. I found I was emotionally drained after observation. The amount of energy and concentration needed I had not anticipated beforehand' (BA 24).*

Another student referred to the challenges of negotiating the role. They described feeling:

*'Nervous of going into someone's home as they may think I'm judging parenting skills' (BA 28)*

Another respondent referred to initially *'finding it intrusive, but as it progressed it became more enjoyable'* (BA 11)

Wittenberg, (1997) writes about this sense of observer as 'intruder' which we have found to be a very common theme in our work with students. Wittenberg suggests it may be thought about too as the extent to which the observer is feeling intruded upon by the baby.

#### **b) Developing writing and presentation skills.**

Students are asked to 'process-record' accounts of observations as soon as possible after the hour is up, with strict adherence to confidentiality. They learn to take-in and retain the detail of what they observe and how they feel. They report becoming confident in their writing skills and in their use of self within the hour as shown here:

*'Writing detailed notes. A much better understanding of how to care for a baby of this age and what are their needs' (MA 14).*

*'learning to observe to gain information; no weeks were the same; I could relate theory more -the child's interactions and growth'. (BA 17)*

One student emphasised the value of having to *'accurately recall and record events'* (BA 30).

#### **c) Learning about subjectivity.**

The students hear a variety of responses to the material they present when they bring their account, in turn, to the seminar. This helps students to appreciate their own subjectivity and that of others, as in this case:

*'I learnt that my own emotions, life experiences and thoughts affect my observations and others may see it differently' (BA 19).*

**d) Student observers come to see the value of 'mulling'.**

The experience of the observation hour is different from writing the account, which is different again from presenting the account to the seminar. The student's understanding may change once the seminar participants have responded to the observation material. This trajectory may continue and could influence the observer's approach when they come to write up their assignment at the end of the module. It is in the essay that the observer may then integrate what they have learned, over time, about the child and about themselves in role. One student summarised what they had gained:

*'Greater awareness of my own feelings and communication; I learnt how easy it is for the children who are secure to adapt and forgive' (BA 18).*

**Discussion**

Social work education in England is subject to a number of competing forces as different providers vie over the best way to deliver professional education and training. University-based programmes, partnered with local state, private and voluntary agencies, compete for practice placement opportunities for students with fast-track graduate qualifying programmes. These are developed centrally initially and then located firmly in local authorities.

A common component of recent policy documents intended to shape social work education and training (Croisdale- Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014) is the stated intention to strengthen practitioners' ability to engage and work with service users and organisational contexts which are characterised by complexity and challenge. In designing the curriculum for university-based programmes, recent reforms require all students to have an intense period of skills and knowledge development prior to their first practice placement showing their 'readiness for direct practice'.

A baby or young child observation, of a sufficient length and depth and structured as outlined here can, we argue, make an irreplaceable contribution to students' learning; in essence, encouraging students to dare to dip a toe in the water, to begin to make sense of what social work is all about. As we have heard from our students: firstly, they gain the opportunity to encounter ordinary child development. From their responses to us, it is apparent that they learn to take up the space to watch at first-hand and explore many dimensions of development. They observe children's physical, sensory, social and cognitive development (Rose, Aldgate & Jones, 2006), bringing their reading of child development theory to life, in their responses to the observed child. The seminar enables students, as both presenter and participant, to reflect upon and critique normative models, prompted by the diversity of the children in the accounts they present. The experience of learning to be with young children is novel for many students and the observation offers them a chance to tune in to the world of babies and young children in advance of placements in which they may be expected to carry out direct work with children.

The second area identified during the evaluation, concerned developing skills for practice; in particular, use of self. Through observing and without having any practical tasks to do,

students take up an observer 'stance' (Wilson, 1992) which offers vast possibilities for perceiving and feeling. Particularly in the beginning, this can mean learning how to tolerate feelings of apprehension, anxiety and guilt about entering the intimate places of the home or nursery. The seminar provides an opportunity to reflect on this, emphasising the value of a professional role which allows for space to think (Briggs, 1999). This, in turn, invites consideration of how the student may themselves feel 'intruded upon' (Wittenberg, 1997) by the observation; to disentangle feelings which may emanate from the student's own internal psychic processes and history (which are not part of the seminar's work) from those which may be picked up from others in the observation. The idea of unconscious processes can be developed, and the psychodynamic concepts of transference and counter-transference identified as they begin to emerge.

Through reflecting on their own subjective feelings, students may also make links to the idea of mentalization when considering examples of children and their care-givers seeming to emotionally-connect with each other or not (Fonagy and Allison, 2012; Ironside, 2012).

Making use of these ideas carefully, respectfully and speculatively, provides students with a theoretical grounding for their practice which is likely to involve working with complex and hidden emotional dynamics. In short, there is potential for students to work in this early, pre-practice setting on developing the capacity for 'informed intuition' (McMahon and Ward, 1998), a process which will continue throughout their training and professional life.

The third theme identified during the evaluation concerns learning to take up and sustain a professional role. The previous section, on how students develop their personal demeanour and ability to reflect, their use of self, feeds into this theme with the observation serving as preparation for the professional home visit. As Ferguson (2009; 2011) has commented, little



research or training is offered on social work programmes concerning home visiting as a distinct and essential element of our practice. In the evaluation, students revealed that to be an effective, emotionally attuned, respectful observer can be exhausting. Such is the case too when carrying out visits in practitioner role. Sensitivity is required when entering someone's private space where often highly intimate, shameful aspects of service user's lives may be explored, assessed and worked with. Learning to manage in these circumstances is not easy and the observation can give a relatively safe, contained space in which to try-out these skills. Winnicott's (1971, p56) model of the baby and mother playing offers the seminar leader some helpful ideas. As he suggests: the mother starts with the baby's playing. When she introduces her own playing, she sees that babies are different in their tolerance of the introduction of play ideas that are not their own. 'Thus the way is paved for playing together in a relationship.' The seminar leader does well to note resistance in an individual observer or group. From Winnicott's (1971, p60) perspective: '...playing has to be spontaneous and not compliant or acquiescent if', as in this case, the aim is for *learning* 'to be achieved'.

We suggest here that the observation seminar delivers a pre-cursor to the model of supervision in which the student learns to present their written observation accounts, to develop the skill to articulate details of the work, and to critique and explore theoretical insights collaboratively with staff and peers. Through eventually writing this up in essay form, the full cycle of 'mulling' over the work can be achieved, enabling a holistic and theoretically informed approach which is inclusive of the perspectives of others.

In conclusion, the baby or young child observation continues to have much to offer social work education at pre-qualifying levels, towards enhancing and improving social workers'

capacities to work with the demands of contemporary practice. Our contention, based on this evaluation, is that when offered as part of university-based social work education, students are uniquely well placed to test out their developing personal and professional capacities and skills through the medium of observation. Observation provides core experiential learning which can be linked to other dimensions required of trainee professionals. In particular, the model allows students to prepare for, carry out and then return to the classroom to share and reflect on their experiences in preparation for their first practice placement. Our typology for teaching observation is offered here as a contribution to this process.

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