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Step by Step, Side by Side: The Quest to Create Relational Artistry through Systemic Practice within Children’s Social Care

Abstract

This paper describes a quest towards relational artistry in the development of a systemic training programme in social care. As part of tiered delivery addressing staff at different levels in the workforce a systemic group supervision process was introduced, adapted from Proctor’s (1997) “Bells that Ring” model. The paper describes the adaptation and delivery of the model through live supervision of senior practitioners by Systemic Mentors working in situ alongside the supervision groups. The project expanded in response to feedback leading to further initiatives to embed systemic ideas. These included a “Systemic Rucksack” containing sets of cards to guide the supervision process. Systemic Champions went on to co-produce and deliver workshops on key concepts for the whole workforce and to engage frontline workers and families in creating the next steps in the project.

Practitioner Points

- Going step by step, taking a participative action learning approach to training in social care can maximise the potential effectiveness of training and help to embed systemic practice throughout the workforce.
- Getting alongside staff through live mentoring, using relational artistry, can enhance participation and learning in systemic group supervision.
- Relational Artistry can be described as a creative process of navigating through positioning and re-positioning in the relational responsive flow of dialogue.
- A Systemic Rucksack, including a collection of cards describing systemic concepts and roles in the systemic group supervision process can enhance theory/practice links and trigger reflexivity.

Introduction

This paper describes the model and practice that has been embedded in an inner London local authority children's services department, following a request for training from a systemic training institution. In the U.K. statutory social work duties are delivered by local authorities, including safeguarding and protection of often marginalised and at risk children. Much has been written about the need to improve supervision in social work (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011), and more recently about the impact of systemic thinking in children's' social work (Trowler and Goodman, 2012). An evaluation of the Reclaiming Social Work model by Bostock et al (2017), identified multiple factors that had a statistically significant impact on the quality of practice, i.e. training in systemic practice was significantly associated with greater worker skill, with the participation of workers in the development programme demonstrating very high-quality practice. A strong relationship was found between the quality of group systemic case discussion and the quality of practice with families, with social workers reporting positive experiences. These factors were integral to the model we developed.

We have written this article much as we developed the training, as a collaborative process where an initial framework evolved and metamorphosed, each contribution informed by previous experience evolving through three action learning cycles (McNiff 2013). We took a primary participative research position, viewing training and supervision as organisational development, (Partridge 2010). We describe the process in a linear fashion but learning from later stages is re-incorporated into the earlier phases, thickening and elaborating the story in an iterative process. The article mirrors the stages we went through in rolling out the project; each main section starts with a description of the experiences of the participants involved from their different positions: the project team, the Mentors (systemic supervisors), and “systemic champions”. Each section is written by representatives of those involved, but the ideas presented have been co-produced dynamically by many and we hope to honour all the contributions made at different levels. We have chosen to write in the first and second person as an act of resistance (Coates, Todd and Wade 2003), to “expert” knowledge in order to privilege the way in which local knowledge evolved and was constructed through small steps woven together to create a coherent whole. Within each section the figures are reproduced from the “Systemic Cards” that we created along route as prompts to systemic practice. These were eventually placed in a “Systemic Rucksack”, a collection of resources for senior practitioners and social workers. In the process of unpacking and putting these prompts to creative use through the framework of systemic group supervision, we entered a process of “relational artistry” termed by Mahaffey (2016) as:

“... a creative process of navigating through the micro and macro activities of positioning and re-positioning in the relational responsive, expressive , spontaneous flow of dialogue”.

(Mahaffey 2016 pp. 1.)

The Context

The borough received a ‘Good’ judgement from Ofsted in November 2017 with ‘Outstanding’ in some areas (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). The model of social work was positively commended in the inspection report executive summary:

“Social workers enjoy working in (this borough) and benefit from manageable caseloads and analytical, reflective group supervision. This is underpinned by systemically trained senior practitioners, working cohesively with highly skilled child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) staff who are integrally located across frontline services. This allows social workers to explore and implement imaginative and bold approaches to assess and support families.” (Ofsted 2017 pp.2)

The borough was already a “learning organisation” (Argyris and Schon, 2009) that prioritised a strengths-based, relationship-focussed approach to working with children and families. The authority’s ‘resilient families’ programme made clear the value of providing the help that families want, when they need it. The authority has long prized user participation and promoted the use of Family Group Conferences across early help, children services and adult social care (Brown, 2003).

In co-designing the model, social workers and managers wanted to complement the existing ethos with a set of systemic social work skills and values which incorporated thoughtful reflective group supervision.

Step 1: The Initial Vision: When the bells rang!

I (first author), am sitting in an office with the Associate Dean and the Portfolio Manager for Social Care (second author) who have called me in to discuss a request for training from a local borough. I am aware of the glaring light and the large empty white board. I preserve my professional exterior but beneath I feel caught in the spotlight like a frightened rabbit. I understand that social services want to commission some systemic training and that they are interested in moving away from a focus on one to one supervision to group supervision. Whilst frozen in the glare, reeling from the pressure to come up with something fast, a distant bell rings. I recall a model I used whilst teaching systemic ideas many years ago called the “Bells that Ring”.

This model developed by Kerry Proctor (1997) at the Bouverie Centre in Adelaide, allocates roles and a structure to a systemic supervision group and uses reflecting processes to enable everyone to participate. A “consultant” interviews a “presenter” whilst “observers” listen. The observers reflect, focusing their reflections on what themes they notice, what they appreciate in what has been presented, what relationships are getting constructed and what resonates for them from their own personal and professional experience, i.e. the “bells that ring”. The consultant checks back with the presenter, as in any reflecting team process, and actions to take forward are decided.

What happened next in my colleague's office illustrates the power of the process. The Bells that Ring model invites participants, who may well (like me), be frozen in the headlights of some much more profound and serious dilemmas in their work with children and families, to enter a space of reflection where ideas may be explored from a stance of appreciation and curiosity. In our conversations with senior managers, we have described this as a Fifth Province position (McCarthy 2018). In Celtic mythology the warring kings of the four provinces of Ireland come together where the provinces meet, in the imaginal space of the fifth province, where all oppositions can be held, dilemmas explored and dualities transformed. It is a space for creativity, a sacred, liminal space (Land, Rattay and Vivian 2014), where opposing dynamics in a system can be observed without getting caught up in them.

In remembering the Bells that Ring, I found myself transformed from the position of frightened frozen rabbit to more of a moon-gazing hare, expanding the context and full of fertile ideas. Within a short timescale we had come up with a plan to take to senior management, consisting of six levels of intervention ranging from consultation to the senior management team, to introductory systemic workshops for all levels of staff. The lynch pin of the project focussed most resources on the senior practitioners, developing systemic supervision through a unique process of live mentoring in the room. A live Mentor would join each senior practitioner in situ using the Bells that Ring model to supervise their pods of social workers (Dugmore, Partridge, Sethi and Krupa-Flasinka 2018).

Holding the tension: Risk, Domains and Positioning

When I was caught like a rabbit in the headlights I had been pushed out of my “window of tolerance” (Corrigan, Fisher and Nutt 2011) into fight/flight or frozen mode. My prehistoric brain was activated, flooding me with fight/flight hormones and by-passing my rational forebrain! In our work with the Senior Management team we have likened this to being in the Domain of Production (Lang, Little and Cronen 1990) where social workers and families feel catapulted into the need for action and where there seems only one view of reality, enshrined in fears about risk, in legislation and the law. This “position of mobilisation” (Fredman 2007) can lead to professionals taking positions of safe certainty and unsafe uncertainty, clinging either too strongly to one solution or being lost amongst many, (Mason 2015). The “bell that rang” for me, in that office reminding me of the model, created a shift in position. In the position of “moon-gazing hare” I had moved into a “position of tranquillity” (Fredman 2007), my forebrain was engaged, I could think and be creative, I had entered the Domain of Explanation where there is a multiverse of possibilities and no right or wrong. I could entertain safe uncertainty and authoritative doubt, a Fifth province position.

Figure i describes the way in which a referral or “concern” arrives in the domain of production. When staff and services are under threat there can be a knee-jerk response to action with no systemic pause to “Stop” and “Explore.” The figure illustrates a shift into the domain of explanation to explore possibilities before returning to action in the domain of production. In teaching about the domains, we have used the image of swapping hats, shifting from a policeman’s hat in the domain of production to an elaborate flowery hat in the domain of explanation. Figures i to v are examples of the Systemic Cards used in the training.

Insert Figure i about here

The Bells that Ring process experiments with different positions (Harre 2003). The positions, ascribed to participants in the group supervision process enable different visions and multiple perspectives. The structure of the process enables all these to be heard. The process shifts from the domain of production where the consultant unpicks the presenting issue to the domain of explanation in the reflecting discussion and then back into the domain of production for action to be decided upon. The process is convergent, then divergent and then convergent again, like an hour glass.

The Bells that Ring could be seen as a metaphor for a functioning organisation; social regulation helps people manage stress in a healthy way. The Bells that Ring process creates a safe space where social workers can be held in mind and supported to process difficult and emotive material. This keeps them in their window of tolerance enabling them to go forward and be effective social workers. The Bells that Ring is synonymous with a Fifth Province position exploring polarities and different perspectives in a way which does not prescribe what is right or wrong, and differences can be explored in an atmosphere of acceptance and appreciation.

Insert Figure ii about here

The characteristics of the domain of production are outlined in Figure ii. We have likened the position taken in the domain of production to taking the posture of a policeman or woman.

Insert Figure iii about here

Figure iii illustrates the characteristics of the domain of explanation. We have likened this position to being an explorer or anthropologist.

The domain of aesthetics, illustrated in Figure iv, refers to how elegantly you can move between domains, it attends to beauty, ethics, usefulness, political timeliness etc. It is like taking the posture of a ballerina or a philosopher.

Insert Figure iv about here

Senior practitioners and management team have found these ideas helpful in the management of risk.

Step 2: The Systemic Training Days and the Systemic Rucksack

The Systemic Rucksack grew out of the initial two, two-day workshops which all staff attended in cohorts of twenty-five across all levels in the workforce. We began to talk about a “systemic rucksack”, imagining an invisible set of theories, skills and techniques which social workers could carry with them wherever they went. We had in mind Peggy MacIntosh’s paper (2004), which explores white privilege as an invisible knapsack which confers unacknowledged privileges on its white wearers.

To our surprise senior managers externalised (White 2007) this idea and purchased neon orange rucksacks for each senior practitioner. We consolidated a series of different types of cards to act as systemic prompts to place in the rucksacks. These included Role Cards to guide the Bells that Ring supervision process, colourful Systemic Concept cards illustrating theory pictorially, e.g. a polar bear peering into an igloo for “Curiosity” and Theory Cards

explaining selected concepts in more depth. These cards invite participants into a playful and creative space and act as a trigger for reflexivity. We produced role cards using Proctor's (1997) original cards for the presenter and observer whilst creating further role cards for consultant, mentors and action planner.

The Systemic Supervision Model

The model builds on Proctor's (1997) process and aims to help the person presenting the case to think for themselves, taking an appreciative stance to themselves, the client/s and their practice. This enables them to be more open to learning and supports them in role, facilitating a culture of candour and openness and contributing to the development of a learning culture, (Weller, Garelick and Naylor 2010). The model deconstructs the power of the supervisor by allocating roles to everyone present and enabling everyone's voices to be heard.

The Systemic Supervision Process

The process can be completed in 30mins and it is surprising what can be done in a 10-minute presentation, however, for those new to the process 45/50 minutes works well. So, the structure could work like this:

- 5 minutes to allocate roles
- Presenter and consultant talk for 10 to 20 minutes
- Observers reflect for 5 to 8 minutes (keep it brief, less is more)
- Consultant checks back with presenter for 5minutes
- Action plans are drawn up 5-10 minutes
- Whole group reflects on the process

The role of “live” Mentor is taken by the Senior Practitioner or by the Systemic Supervisor. Figure v is a visual description of the process which shows the interactions between different systems.

Insert Figure v about here

According to Bateson (2000), context determines meaning, so different systems will have different experiences and viewpoints in the process. This adds a multi layered perspective and increases the richness of the conversations. Maintaining the distance between systems so that people only make eye contact within their sub-system means that the integrity of each system is preserved. This means that when viewpoints are shared in the reflecting team discussion there is a real possibility of “news of difference”, which can influence the presenter. Social workers and families participating in this process sometimes describe a process of reverie, where listening to the reflections sets off their own thought processes in new and unexpected ways.

Step 3: The Contribution of the Systemic Mentors in Supporting the Senior Practitioners

As we (third and fourth author) have taken part in conversations about the model of social work we have been struck by how this is a developing ‘approach method and technique’ shaped in process by social work practice within the borough and from the voices of children and families (Burnham 1992). We endeavoured to open up possibilities for “relational artistry” through constantly paying close attention to relational positions within

conversations in order to create a space for collaborative reflection and facilitate relational ways of going on together (Mahaffey 2013).

In this context we have been exploring from a position of “being with”, and “alongside” each other (Shotter, 2010; Andersen, 1996), collaborating with skilled and experienced social workers who in turn have been tasked with guiding other social workers who are new to practice. Our role of ‘guiding the guides’ in the live use of systemic skills has been intended to empower the Mentors and therefore privilege those strengths models of demonstrating and practicing care.

Along this journey we observed how the ethos of the model reflects the values associated with systemic practice. We have adopted a second order position in collaboration with the social workers and senior practitioners who have been encouraged to view the role of the social worker as intrinsically linked to the process of change experienced by the child and family.

This has led to joining conversations with social workers and managers that have held “the importance of helpful and healthy relationships in mind” (Pratt & Dove 2018 pp. 31-34). In so doing we believe that “our collective ethics speak to the values, intentions, and commitments at the heart of our shared work” with social care staff (Reynolds, 2012 pp. 22-23). We have heard group conversations during the Bells that Ring sessions where social workers spoke with a common purpose about wanting to actively engage with managers about how decisions could be made having considered multiple perspectives. This has inspired us.

Reynolds (2012, pp. 24-25) writes about promoting an “ongoing aliveness, a genuine connectedness with people, and a presence of spirit,” through collective action in raising awareness in order to influence the way systems respond to need. The feedback from social workers about the constraints that hold back achieving curiosity in their day to day work has been voiced at forums for the trainers on an ongoing basis. This reflexive process has ensured that the senior managers are kept updated about the impact of organisational change on staff through direct consultations with the programme leads who are developing the programme in response to the feedback.

As visiting Systemic Mentors, our role has been to help co-create a space in the workplace during a working day, where we would sit alongside the group so that the supervision structure could be developed and maintained. We have actively positioned ourselves ‘physically and metaphorically’ with the staff in the workplace in order to be best placed to join conversations first hand, in a way that is meant to be helpful and supportive (Chidgey & Mahaffey, 2015). Within this process, casework and interpersonal related dilemmas have been reflected upon and thought through with a plan of action at the end of the process.

The process has invited us to pay attention to the “Social Graces” (Burnham 2012), in how we position ourselves as trainers, and how we have coached the group to consider social differences inherent within moments of communication and across relationships. We have noticed that by paying attention to “embodied relational features of the conversational space in and between people,” openings and ideas about how to go on get co- created (Mahaffey, 2013 pp 60).

The Role of Supervisor/Mentor in the Supervision Process

The role of Mentor is taken by one of the systemic supervisors when they are present or by the senior practitioner when they are not. We have likened the role of the Mentor to being an orchestral conductor, active and responsive in the process. This invites Mentors into multiple positions, responding to the context and conversation in the moment as: coach, trainer/supervisor, educator, orchestrator, silent attentive witness, keeping the structure, indicating whose voice needs to be privileged in each part of the session, attending to boundaries and prompting people in their roles. Mentors might focus the groups' attention to the Systemic Concept cards and draw out any of particular relevance to the family being presented, or they might place all the cards in a circle around the group to set a systemic context and invite the group to make theory/practice links. They might suggest questions that could be useful to ask and prompt others in their roles. One of the Mentors introduced a sign made with both hands at right angles to indicate "time-out" a chance to freeze the action, to make a teaching point or make a connection.

The tasks and responsibilities for the Supervisor or Mentor in the supervision process are to assign roles; keep the time boundaries; agree what systemic concepts (picture cards) the group will focus on; prompt the consultant to ask systemic questions of the presenter; facilitate the observers' reflections adding any relevant observations and lead the group reflections on learning at the end of the process making practice links with the identified systemic concept.

The Role of Presenter in the Supervision Process

The presenter's position (Proctor, 1997, p. 218) is like a news presenter or story teller bringing genograms and stories to the group. The process will work best if the presenter can

be specific about what they would like help with, contextualising their dilemma in detail and identifying what they would like to get from the session.

The Role of Consultant in the Supervision Process

The consultant takes the position of an interviewer or investigative journalist, using curiosity and systemic questioning to explore the dilemma brought by the presenter, establishing what might be helpful, clarifying and deconstructing the presenting issue, using the following themes to inform the questioning: how the “Social Graces” inform the work; the self of the social worker; risk and uncertainty and beliefs and stories.

The Role of the Observer/s in the Supervision Process

The observers are like thoughtful, appreciative and critical friends, with an eye to issues of risk. They attend to the four themes, illustrated in Figure vi, they are invited to keep reflections brief by choosing just one or two questions that stick out for them. Observers are invited to start with an appreciative statement, as the presenter will not hear anything else if they feel criticised, as people cannot move on under a negative connotation (Penn 1985). Observers are invited to speak from the first person “I” position and use the name of the participants to avoid falling into an “expert” position and “othering” either the presenter or the client/s, (Combs and Freedman 2012). The idea is that less is more, and the aim is to trigger thinking not provide answers.

Insert figure vi here.

The Role of the Action Planner/s

The role of the action planner signals a shift in gear, pulling the divergent reflecting process into convergent action points. Action planner/s are like gardeners planting seeds and creating practical steps towards future dreams. They are invited to hold in mind that all involved do the best they can at the time and that every problem is a frustrated dream, (McAdam and Lang 2009) i.e. if you can see something is wrong then you must have an idea of how you would like it to be.

The process illustrated above shifts the responsibility for the provision of supervision away from managers to practitioners, supervisors and the wider system as proposed by Wilkins (2017). It fits with the dimensions of what constitutes good practice for senior managers in a strong supervision culture through:

“Ensuring that supervision is well resourced; models the behaviours required of effective supervisors, including acknowledging their own struggles; scrutinising and challenging plans and decisions and providing well-timed training for first line managers.” (Ofsted 2017, pp. 17)

Experiences of the Systemic Mentors

We (second and third authors), have experienced change in our position as senior practitioners have progressed in their journey. Initially the process of mentoring and supervision called us into the position of systemic educator, transferring the systemic teaching and training into live practice supervision, thickening the understanding of the cards in the rucksack and bringing these to life by inviting curiosity about regarding relationships to these ideas. At that point the focus was on learning a new structured way of doing group supervision, talking about cases and conceptualising struggles. Our role was to

actively demonstrate the process and create safe space for experimenting with the different positions that were inviting people to take relational risks and doing things outside their 'comfort zone,' (Mason 2005, Burnham 2018).

Further along the journey we were able to move more into the position of orchestrator building on the energy, harmony and movements being generated in the room, holding the tension points and going with flow; a subtle guiding. It calls us more to be a silent, attentive witness to the unfolding conversation, a motivational guide to enable all voices to be heard.

Step 4: The Emergence of the Systemic Champions

One of the outcomes of the programme has been the emergence of Systemic Champions. I (fifth author) am co-chair of the systemic champions group - a self-selecting group of social workers and managers who are passionate about developing and embedding systemic principles across the service. The organic, grass-roots nature of the champions means we have real life experience 'on the ground' and hold currency when making recommendations to peers and senior management.

In keeping with the action research cycle, the role, function and reach of the champions group has developed over time. We joined together in late 2015, our goal being to embed the learning from the systemic training in a constantly evolving staff team. Over time, the group has developed a much wider brief, being afforded the opportunity to challenge the senior leadership team when barriers are identified to the implementation of the model and recommending and developing changes to organisational process and procedure.

The format of the champions' monthly meetings has developed over time from standard round table meetings to more creative, irreverent sessions. We have challenged ourselves to take risks in playing with roles and responsibilities in the group. The meetings often utilise the Bells that Ring to consider how we invite our colleagues to join us in a meeting holding the systemic principles in mind, or to reflect upon how we manage risk within our systemic framework. Champions have explained that trying things out in this safe forum has bred confidence to practice and share their knowledge and skills across the service. In its current incarnation the group see our role as working relentlessly to promote and embed principles of Systemic Social Work at all levels of the hierarchy and develop an already thriving workplace environment that promotes learning, creative problem-solving and respectful professional challenge.

The Systemic Charter and Promise to Children and Families

Collectively the systemic champions group decided to "think big", to make a film celebrating our successes and promoting the benefits of our systemic social work, to co-produce a 'Systemic Staff Charter' and a 'Promise to Children and Families', to help share our vision with professionals and the community alike, and to evaluate the success of the model so far in developing frontline practice through a survey. *The response rate to the survey was lower than we expected (18.2%). We hypothesised that barriers to social workers completing the survey could be a lack of understanding with respect to the purpose*

and reach of the survey, capacity of staff to take on non-essential social work tasks or an ambivalence to the systemic approach. We are confident that we will get an increased response rate when we run the evaluation process again as these developments have now been made more public through our website, see Footnote 1.

Footnote 1: The film, Charter and Promise to Children and Families can be seen at <https://www.camdenchildrensocialwork.info/pages/camden-model-of-social-work>

Some of the feedback from the staff survey about the impact of the model included:

“(The model) Creates a pause for reflection even when things feel really busy, it feels we are thinking things through together and getting more done together in a short space of time”

“Using the model helps to re-humanise people (as social workers talking about cases we can slip into critical language “this parent has not done x, y, z –with the implicit message that you are failing as a parent) but this helps us imagine being in the shoes of others and helps me to be empathic and appreciative”.

“This model has helped in the context of child protection and how to keep hold of exploration and aesthetics in this domain of production, it has helped me feel ethics in action”.

The charter was conceived as a way to make our values clear, both in how we interact with children and families and also in the organisational context. For champions, the process of making the charter was as important as the finished document as it was built using ideas

and feedback from social workers across the organisation. One of the champions (Williams, 2018) designed a playful exercise to stimulate discussion and consider the values that we wanted to be upheld in the 'Charter'. The exercise challenged each social worker in her team to reflect and write down on post-it notes the answers to the following questions. The answers to each question being written on a different colour post-it note enabling the facilitator to create a visual wall of responses.

- i. What do you tell others when you are talking about your job?
- ii. What does the person closest to you think about what you do?
- iii. What do you wish others knew about your job?

Social workers enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on how we are perceived and positioned by others and how we position ourselves both professionally and in our wider communities (Mahaffey, 2013). The discussions then drew parallels between the usefulness of our physical orange rucksacks as toolkits and prompts and our metaphorical rucksacks of assumptions/ prejudices and "Social Graces" (Burnham 2012), that we carry with us wherever we go, reminding us of our key systemic principle of reflexivity (McNamee, 2009).

The 'Promise to Children and Families' was developed taking feedback from the Family Advisory Board (parents with experience of the child protection system) and the views of young people. The aim was to co-produce documents, our "texts of identity" (White 2007), that support us to communicate to the community what our social work values are and what this means for them in practice.

The Bells that Ring in a Managerial Context: Creating the conditions for frontline practice to thrive

The Systemic Champions have a standing agenda item on the monthly Extended Managers Meetings. The group have devised playful yet powerful exercises for these meetings that engage managers across the organisation. One session positioned the Director and the Heads of Service as 'presenters' in the Bells that Ring, each posing a dilemma pertaining to embedding systemic principles in their workplace context.

This act of the leaders showing vulnerability and transparency (Roberts 2005), in asking for help and acknowledging their own role in the system, assisted others to gain a better understanding of context as well as providing a genuinely helpful response to a dilemma. Managers commented that these sessions raised awareness of challenges faced by colleagues across the organisation, reinforcing a systemic culture of curious, thoughtful dialogue, rather than reverting to blame and silo-working when things get tough.

On another occasion the management team used the Bells that Ring to reflect upon feedback from the staff survey of systemic practice (Owen, 2018). A common theme was that leaders and managers spend too much time in the domain of production. In reflecting upon this and exploring through the domain of explanation, we have been able to appreciate the multiple perspectives and realities held by a diverse staff team and to think together how we can better articulate our shared goals and create meetings, forums and interactions that include these perspectives.

Building Front Line Worker/Team Skills and Resilience

In 2015 when the training began, I (fifth author), was a Senior Practitioner supervising front line social workers. The intensive training and support from the Systemic Mentor was an empowering and enabling experience that led to me feeling valued and invested in.

The responses to the survey helped us to understand the challenges social workers face when implementing the systemic model and supported the champions to celebrate the strengths of systemic thinking highlighting the positive impact upon practice. The survey found that 80% of staff felt that the reflective group supervision was either always helpful or often helpful. When asked whether systemic practice helped to ensure that the child's needs were at the centre of their practice, 80% said yes, 13% not sure and 7% no. One respondent explained that the systemic model fostered a "much more collaborative approach" and that the "information derived is richer and enables me to delve deeper in to the dilemmas facing the family." It was the established staff with their longstanding relationships and organisational alliances who promoted this new way of working, rather than a team of outside agents who had been "parachuted" in. When specialist clinicians are used there is often a 'disconnect' between those who are positioned as time-rich, reflective consultant clinicians and those time-poor social workers and case managers.

This "learning through practice" mentoring and experience in facilitating group reflective supervision enabled the front-line managers (like me), to develop a style that suited us and which married systemic thinking and case action-planning. That is not to say the process was easy and the twelve months mentoring was certainly a journey of discovery and learning. I

had qualified as a social worker in the era of performance data and statistics; my managers, whilst being supportive and caring, had often modelled a style of leadership which looked for the “one true answer”. The mentoring I received was invaluable in enabling me to practice asking thoughtful systemic questions that unlocked ideas in the social workers with whom I was supporting, rather than jumping to offering solutions.

There were moments when I felt stuck and where I struggled to imagine a way to integrate the systemic principles when managing risk, but the Mentor appreciated this challenge and we worked collaboratively, alongside one another, thinking with the social worker to create questions they could ask the family to enable them to enact change and reach “safe uncertainty” (Mason 2015). One of the outcomes of this approach is that social workers have reported a sense of being able to bring their personal resources to this challenging work. One social worker wrote in their survey response that:

“I think it (the bells that ring) helps me both personally and as a professional to carry the weight of making such important decisions for children and their families”

Trying to build relationships with people who are at difficult points in their lives is challenging, but sharing these challenges and the feelings that accompany them, has been powerful. The Bells that Ring gave us permission to bring a little more of ourselves to the case discussions, to talk about our own histories, both professional and personal, which led to us understanding each other more deeply, and being able to support one another emotionally when the toll of the work became greater.

The champions group are striving to ensure that the model of social work is sustained even after the training and support from the Mentor's ends. Online training videos and written resources are being compiled and regular 'Systemic Conversations' take place; half-day experiential workshops co-produced and facilitated by members of the champions group alongside Mentors from the training organisation. This means that we have also received Mentoring in presenting and teaching systemic ideas. There are eight such experiential learning sessions, each focussing on the application of a systemic concept to practice. Once the champions have been supported by their Mentors to plan and deliver these workshops, we will then be able to re-run them regularly on our own, incorporating the feedback from those who attended previously.

Next Steps on a Continuing Journey

At this stage of the journey, three years on, we are noticing the emergence of a shared language with a commitment towards both applying theory to practice and linking practice to theory. This has occurred through a 'step by step and side by side' approach between the systemic training institution and the local authority. Each action learning cycle has resulted in new commissions based on feedback, adding and refining the model and applying learning to different contexts.

The framework of the Bells that Ring has created a "rallying call", a signifier in our shared language and a stepping-off point for new developments. Our next steps have included the adaptation of the model to the 'Right Balance Multi-Agency Discussions', where following the Family Group Conference social workers have presented their plan to the multi-agency group. The Bells that Ring did not fit in this context, where a plan had already been created

in the Family Group Conference, so we adapted the roles and reflections to fit the context of the multiagency meetings. We are now trialling including families in the discussion to present their own plans.

“Being alongside” has seen a shift in positioning throughout the service and in future parents and young people will take an active part, participating and co-producing training and informing developments. Evaluating progress from the perspective of children and families will be a part of this continuing journey and positions us collectively as reflexive to the fluidity of the ever-shifting process of human relationships. We hope to bring forth creativity and elegance in finding ways to go on, orientating us towards practice that is continually evolving and adapting in a never-ending quest towards relational artistry.

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