Relationship-based practice: Keeping the 'heart' in practice

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Abstract: This article will explore the importance of sound relationship-based practice in the supervision and assessment of social work students in practice learning. It will consider the origins of relationship-based practice and explore and analyse the literature and most notable theorists in this area. It will go on to explore the links between attachment theory and relationship-based practice in order to demonstrate its pivotal importance to social work practice. It will draw parallels between good relationship-based practice in the supervision of social work students and the formation of successful and meaningful working relationships between the students and the people they support on placement, giving attention to the theoretical concept of parallel process. It will provide practice examples from student supervision sessions to model how sound relationship-based practice compliments the assessment process with students, and leads to good partnership working and shared goals on placement. By providing practice examples it will demonstrate that good relationship-based practice between student and supervisor can lead to successful outcomes for students on placement which, in turn, can lead to successful outcomes for the people the students go on to support. It will argue that good relationship practice is the basis for all good social work practice and its foundations should be laid early within the practice teaching relationship between supervisor and student.

Keywords: relationship-based practice; social work students; practice teaching; supervision; assessment

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Introduction

Maslow (1968:3), writing on human needs, argues that 'we have, each of us, an essential biologically based inner nature, which is to some degree 'natural', intrinsic, given, and in a certain limited sense, unchanging'. Here, the claim is that human 'nature', with its needs for safety and security, for belonging, for loving and being loved, for feeling trusted and trusting, has a universal quality that transcends the specificity of any one time, ethnicity or culture. (Hennessey, 2011, p.3, citing Maslow, 1968)

Here, Maslow reminds us of the importance of relationships and their universal quality. It is this human bond which binds us with others and transcends all other factors.

In relationship-based work, the relationship between worker and individual is seen as the primary vehicle for change (Murphy et al., 2013). This is enshrined in policy and legislation and firmly supported by evidence, not least from my own professional experience (Wampold, 2009, Munro, 2011). Drawing on my professional experience in child protection, protecting vulnerable adults, or supporting students on placement, I have always found the relationship to be at the very core of the work. The quality of the relationship formed is crucial to influencing positive change, positive outcomes on placement and the student's ability to create good relationships with the people they are supporting in their own work. In my own professional experience relationship-based practice actually *works*. It is important across all spheres of social work and especially with students on placement who will go on to be the future workforce. This is why I wanted to write this paper.

Why is relationship-based practice important?

There have been many contemporary texts describing the importance of relationship-based practice: Trevithick (2003), Ingram and Smith (2018), Ruch, Turner and Ward (2010), Munro (2011), Hennessey (2011) and Coulter et al., (2020) being notable texts. Relationship-based practice is a slippery fish which draws on an eclectic mix of underpinning theories, some of which will be referred to in this article. Primarily, relationship-based practice requires the foundations and the mechanics of the working relationship to be correct.

The most important things in the work we do are the relationships that we form and nurture, whether it is between students, people we are supporting, or internal and external colleagues. The stronger your network and bonds, the better armed you are for what lies ahead. Carpenter et al.'s study reinforces how good, reflective supervision correlates with perceived worker effectiveness as well as job satisfaction, retention and even increased critical thinking (Carpenter et al., 2015). They cite a number of studies which support this, including Cearley's study of child welfare workers in the US, which found that empowering supervision affected worker's feeling of empowerment and increased their ability to make decisions. West et al. (2017) also states that when practitioners are treated with compassion, they in turn model it in their own practice, and this is echoed in Hafford-Letchfield's (2019) paper regarding the importance of leading with compassion. West et al. (2017) notes that where leaders prioritised high quality, compassionate care, it was shown to have a profound effect on clinical effectiveness, patient safety and patient experience. Good relationship-based practice is about affording people time and meaningful presence. Without the space and time to do this, we lose the productiveness and meaningfulness of the work (Munro, 2011; Oakeshott, 1989; Yuill et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2015). Oakeshott (1989) correctly warns against a 'crowded' life where people are continually busy, something referred to by Morrison as being stuck 'in action' (ibid, 2005). This is essentially being lost in 'doing' with no time to stand back, think, and reflect. Supervisory relationships need time, and for the pause button to be pressed. Trevithick (2003) describes relationships as being at the 'heart of practice' or a 'cornerstone' (Ingram and Smith, 2018). In child and youth care, where practice placements also form a core part of educational curriculum, the relationship has also been identified as the foundation for all work (Garfat et al., 2018), central to residential child care practice here in the UK (Kendrick et al.,2011; Smith, 2009). This paper argues that the supervisory relationship between practice teacher and student is at the heart of the placement and essentially at the heart of practice, with the supervisory beats reverberating outwards into the student's own practice on placement and into future professional practice.

Relationship-based practice, like it says on its proverbial tin, is practice which uses the relationship between practice teacher and student, or worker and person they are supporting, as an ongoing vehicle to promote positive change. It is the base or foundation of the work. Often, the dynamic relationship is also a formative intervention in itself which is

used alongside other assessment and intervention strategies. It should not be underestimated, side-lined or overlooked, and should always remain at the heart of practice and at the core of the work. The front cover of the report: 'The Munro Report of Child Protection' captures the elements of relationship-based practice visually in a word collage. Those words pictured include:

Reliable, supportive, trustworthy, accessible, consistent, empathetic, respectful, approachable, honest, open, continuity, dedicated, involving, listening, helpful, experienced, enthusiastic, kind. (Munro, 2011).

These are key elements of relationship-based practice. What was valued by the children giving evidence to the review was *the ongoing relationship* and the time professionals spent with them. They emphasised the importance of reliability, honesty and continuity from their social workers. The remit of Munro's report was to 'make recommendations to strengthen the social work profession'. One of the key factors in the report is to emphasise the importance of the ongoing relationship between worker and child, with 'relationship skills' being at the core of protecting children (Munro, 2011, p.21). 'Unnecessary bureaucracy and guidance' (Secretary of State for Education, 2010) were seen as a barrier to professional judgement and child-centred practice, and detracted from the focus on the *actual* work with people. Munro states that when the bureaucratic elements become the focus, the 'heart' of the work is lost (Munro, 2011, p.10). We must reclaim the heart of the work. What better starting point then, for arguing that relationship-based practice improves outcomes for students on placements, than the fact that good relationship-based practice leads to better outcomes for children in child protection work and helps keep them safe (Munro, 2011).

In relationship-based practice it is the knowing how to do the work that is important (Munro, 2011, Trevithick, 2003), rather than merely 'knowing about' it. The 'how' of relationships is crucial. In child and youth care, a shift in language from creating a relationship to 'being in relationship' (Garfat, 2012:13) reflected a strengthening focus on the self of the worker and how they co-create the relationship with the child or young person (Garfat, 2012). Steckley (2020) argues that the co-created relationship between educator and student warrants similar attention and can serve as a formative template for the way students approach their relationship-based practice in the field. In order to effectively teach the 'hows' of relationship-based practice, Ward (2018) argues for a move from instructional to learning modes and knowledge in action. He stresses that

students' experiences of relationship-based processes are as important as any content that may be imparted through instruction. Emond et al. (2018) build on the concept of parallel process, where the relationship modelling in supervision maps on to the young person's praxis in relationships, and acts as a prototype for the young person in their future relationships (Garfat, 2012). Drawing on my experience, this is what I have observed happening in my own practice teaching, where my supervisory relationship becomes the direct prototype for the student's own working relationships on placement, and this will be illustrated through the article.

The origins of relationship-based practice

Octavia Hill became known as the 'grandmother of Social Work' and epitomises practising with heart. She believed that getting to know the people she worked with, and their character, improved her practice. In her 1869 address to the Social Science Association, Hill said that social workers needed knowledge of 'people, their character, their inner life and personal experience'. She formed relationships with the children in her school and said she would 'have to study how to interest each' she said at that time. 'I connect all they say, do or look, into one whole, and get to know the thing they really care for' (Young and Ashton, 1956, p.116)

She said she wanted to:

> Move, touch and teach them…Our ideal must be to promote the happy natural intercourse of neighbours. Only when face meets face, heart meets heart; only in the settled link with those who are old friends…is [there] more opportunity to grow and to shine. (Woodruffe, 1962, p.52)

Similarly, students need to feel understood and know you are by their side, walking alongside them through the placement in order to 'grow and to shine'. It is about walking a mile in their shoes and enables students to become 'effective helpers in the field' (Hudson and Sheldon, 2000, p.65). As the practice teacher walks alongside the student, as does the student walk alongside the people they support. In Scotland, a student must carry out three assessed direct observations. Over the course of these, I have noted how many student's relationship-based practice improves as their relationship with myself as supervisor becomes more open, honest,

trusting, congruent and dynamic. I have witnessed this many times on placement; where when the student's relationship with myself has flourished and trust has been built, then so too, does their relationship with the people they are supporting. There is a clear transfer onto their own practice and parallel process in the 'here and now' relationships, with the supervisory relationship serving as a prototype for the student's own working relationships in their practice on placement (Emond et al., 2018). This is clearly an area for future research. Carpenter notes the general lack of strong, empirical evidence on how supervision influences positive practice outcomes (Carpenter et al., 2013) and Lambley's study of supervision in adult-care organisational settings echoes this, stating that whilst service users are 'indirect beneficiaries' of supervision, service-use feedback on the indirect impact of supervision, is an underdeveloped area that needs further research (Lambley, 2019, p.391-392).

It is difficult to coin terms which adequately denote partnership working which are completely anti-oppressive and this is a noteworthy area for consideration throughout all practice. Even in practice learning, the titles of practice teacher (in Scotland) or practice educator (in England) and the students they support immediately illustrates the shift in the balance of the power to the teacher or educator. A variety of language will be used through this article, through quotes and references. I will opt for practice teacher, student and the people they support, although this still denotes a certain dependency and reliance on the student.

Relationship-based practice as systemic learning

Good placements are student-led and uphold the standards in Social Work Education (SISWE). Within them, students need to learn how to use supervision effectively and prepare, engage and contribute to the supervisory process as active learners. The learning team – consisting of student, practice teacher (or educator in England), university tutor and linkworker (person in the agency with day to day workplace supervision responsibilities) – must work collaboratively and in a united manner throughout. Ingram and Smith open this out, stating that:

> Relationship-Based Practice thus, potentially, becomes a cornerstone of social policy, percolating, not just individual relationships but the ways in

> which workers across different disciplines and wider communities interact and relate with one another. (Ingram and Smith, 2018, p. 7)

Relationship-based practice should extend across the system of support for the student. One can visualise it as a pebble thrown into the whole systemic pond on placement, rippling outwards and extending into all of its parts. Coulter et al. (2020) argue for theoretical cohesion between relationship-based practice in child and family's social work, and a systematic approach. They firmly situate relationship-based practice in the middle of the wider systemic relationships where the social worker uses relationship-based practice to involve and facilitate change by collaborating and involving all parties within this process (Coulter et al., 2020). This can be mapped onto student placement nicely, with the practice teacher or educator as facilitator in the systematic relationships on placement. Ruch et al. (2010) also sets relationships in the wider systemic context, highlighting relationship-based practice as:

> … concerned with the content, process and dynamics of relationships, their visible and invisible components and the connections between the intrapsychic, interpersonal and boarder social contexts in which they are embedded. (Ruch et al., 2010, p.28)

So positive relationship-based practice can be seen as extending to all parts of the learning system, with positive relationship modelling by the practice teacher hopefully leading to positive role modelling by the student to the people they are supporting (Emond et al., 2018).

Relationship-based practice and power

Good relationship-based practice operates on a sound value base and is a 'power with' approach. It is an 'I'm okay, you're okay relationship'. The practice teacher and student are engaged in a relationship where there is an obvious power dynamic. This is due to the assessment undertaken by the practice teacher during the placement, who has the pass/fail decision in their hands (Finch, 2017, Morrison, 2005, Hawkins et al., 2010). Turner-Daly et al. (2014) refer to the way power is exercised as being a crucial factor in the establishment of effective supervisory relationships,

with the misuse of power within the confidential, one-to-one space of supervision as having the potential to hide 'poor practices' or enforced agendas (Cooper 2020). Power must therefore be used wisely, appropriately and with kindness.

Hackett and Marsland describe the relationship between practice teacher and student as a 'power-charged learning relationship' (1997, p.49). 'Power' is the 'elephant in the room', that needs to be discussed at the very start of the supervisory relationship. As with workers and the people they support, the power dimension always feels 'at odds' with partnership working. It is worth dedicating an initial supervision session to discuss power and the different types (see Finch, 2017,, pp.94-97 for a discussion on power and reflective activities). Thoughtful use of power in the practice teacher/student relationship can provide formative experiences of 'working alongside', as well as create a parallel process in which students can work through power-related issues they are grappling with on placement (Emond et al., 2018).

Drawing on the principles of Carl Roger's (1961) person-centred practice, working relationships founded on 'empathy, warmth and genuineness' are more likely to be experienced as 'power *with*' than 'power over' and include qualities of: honesty, reliability, congruence, concern, good listening skills, appropriate use of humour, respect, attention to detail, patience, sensitivity and all these things that make for good relationships. Biestek (1957) captures these components in his influential text *The Casework Relationship* in which he details the appropriate attitudes, knowledge and abilities required by a social worker in terms of seven principles. These are individuation, purposeful expression and emotion, controlled emotional environment, acceptance, a non-judgemental attitude, client self-determination and confidentiality and emotional containment. A procedural, managerial, detached, 'power over' relationship makes it impossible to practice in a relationship-based way with students and therefore compromises successful outcomes and the chance of a student reaching their full potential and essentially passing the placement. The person-centred principles of honesty, congruence and transparency must run through the whole placement like words through a stick of rock. Concerns *must* be raised as soon as possible and openly discussed, accompanied by precise and specific examples to keep the assessment fluid, dynamic and ongoing and ensure a 'goal directed partnership' (Marvin and Britner, 1999). There should be no 'smoke and mirrors' in the supervisory relationship.

The journey through placement

The beginnings of the placement are very important. The supervision agreement or contract, which is drawn up at the start of placement, is key, as it defines how the supervisory relationship should work and sets expectations (Wonnacott, 2012, Morrison, 2005, Carroll and Tholstrup, 2001, Kudashin, 2002). A supervision contract (adapted from Morrison, 2005) is an important tool that I have found useful to help establish the basis of the supervisory relationship and compliments the placement learning contract. It sets the scene for a discussion about what makes good supervision and enables both parties to lay out what they find helpful and unhelpful to their learning. Morrison (2005) sets out the number of reasons that this contract is important, including reflecting the seriousness of the activity and positive modelling of partnership working. It can also be referred back to when there are issues and facilitates discussion about pathways to go down if there are problems, enabling a discussion around complaints and conflict resolution. I always explore previous experiences of supervision, as negative experiences can leak into the early stages of the supervisory relationship. Reflection on experience of positive and negative supervision, and helpful and unhelpful styles can also start to unpick experiences of oppression and discrimination (Morrison, 2005, SCOPT, 2018). Further tools such as a 'student pen picture', where a student describes themselves, what influenced them and what is important to them, provided at the very start of the placement, can help to form and nurture the supervisory relationship and facilitate appropriate sharing in individual and group supervision settings. This can help 'set up the stall' correctly for the supervisory relationship and help teach both parties about the others 'aspects of self', in terms of values, beliefs and cultural experience thus concentrating on a shared humanity (Hennessey, 2011). Honey and Mumford's learning styles questionnaire is an obvious staple tool to also find the student's preferred learning style (*Ibid,* 1982). The early stages are essential to good relationship-based practice and time should be taken with these.

Assessment

Assessment is formative throughout placement with key summative points. Formative assessment means it is ongoing, progressive and constantly evolving through the teaching methods and the ongoing learning happening throughout the placement. Summative learning is an assessment *of* learning, and essentially denotes a 'line in the sand', where the practice teacher looks back and makes a summative assessment 'of learning'. There is a summative point midway at the 'midpoint' of placement, and a final, summative report at the end of the placement where the final report and discussions decide whether a student has either passed or failed and can progress on the course or qualify as a social worker.

The midpoint is the checkpoint half way through the placement where the practice teacher, university tutor, student and linkworker meet to review the placement, and the practice teacher provides a midpoint report to the university tutor drawing from a range of evidence and sources (including direct observations, wider team members and linkworker feedback). Any developmental needs, which the student should be aware of throughout the regular supervision sessions and open, honest and congruent dialogue, are then outlined in the written midpoint assessment report, and the student has then a clear developmental plan for the second half of the placement. The final summative assessment is obviously at the end of the placement where the satisfactory or unsatisfactory decision is made by the practice teacher. Honesty and congruence should follow through the placement, alongside dynamic discussion and any highlighted issues must be raised immediately and encapsulated within the midpoint report thus maintaining transparency throughout. These need to be accompanied by precise and specific examples thus keeping the assessment fluid, dynamic and ongoing and ensuring a 'goal directed partnership' (Marvin and Britner, 1999). Parker and Bradley (2008) refer to assessment as an 'ongoing, fluid and dynamic process'. They acknowledge that 'changes and developments in a person's life may have a significant impact on how a situation is seen and responded to' (p.9). In the times of stress and challenge which are found on placement the student's previous experiences of relationships, particularly with parents, carers and previous supervisors, can impact on and infiltrate the current supervisory relationship.

Having a face to the surface and a face to the depths

As well as assessing the student's practice, the practice teacher must also have an 'eye' to the student's wellbeing throughout. As will be illustrated later in example one, this ensures that previous relationships or life events, (for example those characterised by anxiety or trauma), do not skew the work carried out in supervision and thus affect the emerging professional self of the student. Jeremy Walsh's (2018) illuminating article 'Being Alongside: Working with Complexity and Ambiguity in Caring Relationships' highlights the importance of looking both at 'surface' and 'depth' issues from a psychoanalytically informed and psychosocial approach. He states that depth issues may emerge consciously and unconsciously through various 'defended positions' such as splitting and projection. Dartington (2010) states that work must be therefore approached with 'two faces'. One face:

> … views the necessity to be rational and clear headed, while the other face views the complexity, emotional turmoil and disturbance that emerges from mental illness and permeates the lives of service users and carers. (cited in Walsh, 2018, pp.204-205)

It is not uncommon for emotional issues and/or undiagnosed mental health issues to arise, or be exacerbated, during placement when a student shifts from a 'taught' environment to the harsh, lived realities of the people they are supporting on placement and 'placement reality shock' where 'case studies' and academic examples become real people in distress, presenting starkly in front of them. Tinklin et al. (2005) note the increasing number of recorded students in higher education experiencing mental health problems with Naylor and Smith's study making a clear link between socio-economic status and 'dropping out' (as well as other groups such as younger students, students who were married and those with lower entry qualifications (Naylor and Smith, 2001)). Gair and Baglow (2018) studied the experience of students in Australian universities, and noted that the onset of mental health issues coincided with the commencement of students' studies due to managing the associated stressors, alongside the financial and personal burden of placement. These contributed to a decline in their mental health and 'emerging signs of mental distress' (ibid, 2018: 40). As practice teachers with a supportive but also a gatekeeping function, we need to be mindful of this research and be aware that students with

vulnerabilities may require additional support; at the same time, their 'lived experience' may be invaluable to their understanding, insight and empathy towards those they support (Holley et al., 2015, Gair and Baglow, 2018. The practice teacher is still the gatekeeper for the profession and the learning outcomes on placement must still be met (Holly et al., 2020).

If the supervisory relationship in practice learning has a strong foundation and adheres to the principles of relationship-based practice the student should flourish. Heard and Lake (1997) espouse what they term a 'supportive/ companionable' approach, which they describe as:

> … a protective, explanatory and exploratory form of relating. It is warm, unanxious and is accompanied by appropriate constructive misattunements. Conflict, when it arises, is handled by recognition of the other's points of review and resolved through negotiation and compromise. (Heard and Lake,1997, p.34)

This is very important advice in terms of student assessment, the challenges which arise in terms of the student's learning journey, and how a student might approach these challenges. It follows that this is an approach that is favourable in Social Work practice as a whole. A careful use of power alongside a supportive and companionable approach, combined with all the elements of relationship-based practice is a staple for the student/practice teacher relationship.

Practice teachers' use of self in relationship-based practice

The poet, William Blake wrote:

> Can I see another's woe?
> And not be in sorrow too? (Blake, 1908)

When confronting the lived experience of others on placement, Walsh (2018) underlies this dichotomy and the metaphorical tightrope for the student to walk between, on the one side, being too close to the situation and, on the other, the 'pain' of not being close enough and therefore:

> … not engaging with the pain and avoiding the personal impact of the work which may inhibit and opportunity for change and growth'. (Walsh, 2018, p. 205)

I would therefore extend Walsh's findings to practice teachers who need to have 'two faces' during the supervisory process. It is vital for students to find their work/life balance in supervision and learn 'self care' skills to manage this tightrope walk so they can take these lessons from placement into their professional life. It is probably the most important learning challenges on placement as it will teach student essential survival skills in a safe and supported learning environment.

I always say to students, people won't necessarily remember what you do but they will remember how you are with them, how you treat them, and how you make them feel. Howe (2009) talks about the importance of connecting 'mind to mind' and the fact that we value being understood. It is about 'mind meeting mind' and 'eye meeting eye' with the work happening in the space in between. Howe highlights that it is a human want to understand and be understood by others. He describes relationships as

:

> … a difficult, messy business. But so long as we continue to struggle to connect, communicate and understand, there is always the prospect of change, the hope of finding meaning'. (Howe, 2009, p.159).

Here he underlies the 'struggle' to connect. This can be difficult for students who have internalised attachment models characterised by anxiety and born out of previous negative attachment experiences. Ward makes a good point when he says that placement learning arises when it is approached as if students are:

> … travellers (some more experienced, others less so) who will discover or rediscover territory and make realisations, sometimes together and sometimes individually- not always the same things, and not necessarily about what was intended or planned for. (Ward, 2018, p.192)

He says that the 'best learning for relational work will arise within a learning relationship' and the ideal time for this is on placement. He states that the practice teacher must have:

> … a willingness to be open about their ignorance as well as their knowledge, and about their difficulties as well as their strengths; a willingness to take risks and live with uncertainty within the learning and teaching relationship but nevertheless the ability to stay within the role as an educator and not to break boundaries by pretending to be friend or an equal. (Ward, 2018, p. 192)

I think this is an excellent example of the tightrope a practice teacher or educator walks in their relationship-based practice with students. Trevithick (2003), Gharabaghi (2010), Munro (2011) and Ruch (2018) all highlight the need for practitioners to know *how* to 'be in a relationship and have what Gharabaghi describes as 'relationship skill'. It also highlights the need for practice teachers to be comfortable with their vulnerabilities to allow students to be the same. Howe (2008) draws on the work of others on the 'use of self' (Sudbery 2002, Shulman, 1999) and notes that the self is the reference point for understanding others. He notes:

> To know one's self is to know the other and to know the other is to know one's self. (Howe, 2008, p.185-186)

It is therefore about practicing with kindness no matter what the placement outcome may be. Even students who are struggling on placement, or who are highly anxious or defensive, need care and recognition whatever the outcome. It relies on excellent emotional attunement, heightened emotional intelligence (Howe 2008), and impeccable use of self by the practice teacher who is also comfortable opening up about their own vulnerabilities and challenges in learning. This is in keeping with the Socratic paradox and knowing that 'true knowledge and wisdom exists in knowing that you know nothing' (Bowden, 2005). The placement acts as a learning journey for both practice teacher and student and approaching the placement with honesty and vulnerability is key to ensuring that supervision is a safe space to make mistakes.

Walsh states that relationship-based practice must be driven by the belief to work in a:

> … supportive and companionable way with one another through difficult times to resolve difficult issues, and so might supervisory practice, but a belief or commitment to do so is not the same as being able actually to do so. (*Ibid*, 2018, p. 234)

Hennessey states that the worker (or in this case practice teacher) will use their own self:

> … as a relational and possibly, reparative resource for the client' [or student]. (Hennessey, 2011, p.43)

The task being to balance the *use* of self with the *sustaining* of self. Schofield (1998) discusses the fact that the inter-relationship the worker has with the people they support cannot 'be discussed meaningfully' without reference to the intra-relationship that they have with themselves where 'each is affected by the other'. Self-awareness on the part of the practice teacher and student is therefore key. Students want to be understood and want to also understand their new professional selves in the context of the placement. The ebb and flow of the supervisory relationship is the space in which this can be achieved.

Supervision and the supervisory relationship

Kadushin (1990) describes the relationship between a worker and the people they support in terms of a 'communication bridge between people' and this extends to the supervisory relationship (*ibid,* 1990, p.36-57). The weekly supervision sessions provide the bedrock to the placement. This communication bridge links the two worlds between practice teacher and student with empathy and self-knowledge serving as ways of interpreting the similarities and differences between these two worlds (Sudbery, 2002, p.156). Trevithick (2003) warns of the dangers of a 'detached and mechanistic' relationship which, when applied to students, can instil fear, and prevent students from asking questions, being open and transparent about concerns, difficulties and dilemmas, and essentially prevent them seeking help in the future. Hennessey (2011, p.17) states that if we separate from ourselves, then this is 'tantamount to separating from our client' or in this case, the student. Good supervision is the prerequisite to good practice and lends itself to a healthy career in social work.

The practice examples that follow are an amalgam of practice experience that the writer has had with a variety of students across the years and do not denote any one student. The names provided are fictitious. The examples are offered up to illustrate the main points in this article.

Example One

At the start of the placement, Amanda was very uncomfortable in supervision initially attempting to cut it short by have a back to back meeting and not allowing sufficient time for the session. She held herself very rigidly in supervision in a defended pose (holding her arm) and was in obvious discomfort with the intimacy of the experience. Coupled with this, the practice teacher's feedback on the first observation was that it was overly formal and detached, formalised language was used with preference to impersonal, detached and aloof terms such as 'We' or 'the agency' as opposed to 'I'. Amanda struggled to connect with the woman she was supporting and she was not attuned to her emotional needs. The session felt at cross-purposes; the woman had clearly disengaged from the student and was fiddling with her phone. The practice teacher gave 'one face' to the possible 'depths' of past trauma and another face to the ongoing 'surface' work and plans for the intervention. After a couple of sessions, she raised awareness of this anxiety, reflected back observations to Amanda, and it was openly discussed. The journey of self was very apparent during the supervision process. As Amanda continued to build up trust with the practice teacher, the sessions relaxed into an honest, open discussion where the practice teacher reflected back their impressions of the student's discomfort which were validated. As Amanda became more comfortable in supervision and with their use of self, this filtered into their practice and their relationships flourished and strengthened. The emotional attunement that was missing from the first observation became there in abundance and the 'journey of self' for this student was incredible. Previous experiences of negative attachment had infiltrated the supervisory relationship, even leading to anxious thoughts outwith placement, and creeping self-doubt. Amanda's re-experience of a trusting intimate relationship was the foundation for their own good practice and a confident and competent exercising of their 'use of self' and growth in self-confidence. It follows that the more closely integrated the student's sense of self, the closer their connection will be with the people they support.

This example demonstrates the impact of the practice teacher's use of self on the student's confidence in their own use of self. It essentially helps students build their confidence to practice as 'themselves' rather than some acquired notion of what they think a professional social worker

should look like. The reluctance to use 'I' in discussions with the service user reflects the students lack of confidence in their own self-efficacy and ability to 'own' the work and take responsibility for their own practice, perhaps due to feelings of unworthiness or 'imposter syndrome' (Langford et al., 1993). The principles of relationship-based practice relevant here are trust, empathy, kindness, congruence and containment. The practice teacher had an eye to the surface issues, as well as an eye to the student's anxiety and past experience of trauma, and attachments characterised by fear and anxiety. As the practice teacher contained the student's emotions and worked through the anxiety, by parallel process, the student was then able to go on and support and contain the strong emotions of a woman she was supporting. Howe points to the parallel process at work between practice teacher and student and student and the people they support stating that:

> Good reflective supervision can help deepen worker's understanding of their own and their service user's psychological condition and mental state so that the therapeutic nature of the relationship between worker and user is maintained. (Howe, 2008, p.187)

This woman had precarious status and was navigating the asylum process. She was recovering from trauma and as such her emotions were turbulent and could result in verbally aggressive outburst. It was reported that other agencies found her 'challenging' and 'difficult to work with' with some effectively 'closing their doors to her'. Following feedback from the first direct observation and discussions in supervision, Amanda continued on with the work, focusing on the use of self and the relationship. She navigated some hostile exchanges well, and attuned to the woman's needs and emotional state. Amanda also researched attachment, trauma, the experiences of women seeking asylum and grief and loss to inform their understanding. She demonstrated commitment, congruence, resilience and reliability, and this never waivered throughout the placement, despite the women's varying emotional states and occasional, hostile verbal exchanges. The student modelled a positive attachment. When the lady gave birth to her child, Amanda was the only person to visit her and show her kindness and continuity of support. During supervision, the student reflected on the ward, and every other bed full of visitors and balloons at visiting time. This relationship was incredibly valuable and provided a strong foundation for the student's future work. A similar supervisory

journey for another student resulted in them being described by a man they supported as 'getting him through' when he had lost all hope and was contemplating suicide. He said the student and the agency had been the only ones to have shown him 'love' in the appropriate sense. This is the power of relationship-based practice. Both examples serve to demonstrate how the learning that happens within the supervisor relationship can transfer onto the student's work with others.

An understanding of parallel process helps to illuminate the mirroring of relationships in the 'here and now' (Emond et al., 2018). The above example shows the immediate mapping and mirroring of skills from that developed in the 'here and now' supervisory relationship, onto their own work with the person they are supporting. Bromberg (1982) states that parallel processing can draw attention to what may be 'unconsciously concealed', such as 'deep anxiety'. Indeed, this is what had surfaced with this student. Power differentials and the role of authority and dependency also have a part to play here and therefore the importance of using power wisely cannot be understated (Morrissey and Tribe, 2001, p.105). The relational learning in supervision and the positive attachment modelling meant that this could be 'flushed out', brought to supervision, discussed and the student could be unshackled from this anxiety and free to practice.

I'm okay, you're okay and then they are also okay

Ward (2018) notes that the best learning about relationship-based practice happens within the context of learning relationships such as that between student and practice teacher. Authoritarian approaches, Ivory towers and managerial loudspeakers do not bring about successful outcomes on placement as they restrict the potential for students to grow and to change. Maccoby and Martin's (1983) parenting styles map nicely onto our understanding of relationship-based practice. Of the four parenting styles (permissive, authoritative, neglectful and authoritarian), the aim is to stay in the authoritative zone. Wonnacott (2012) applies this to our understanding of supervision. In the authoritative zone the student is confident, clear and engaged in problems solving. This is in contrast to other zones for example in the authoritarian zone where the student is 'dependent, anxious or rigid' and there is defensive problem solving. We are looking for the proximal zone of working where there is sufficient

challenge and test but framed by a supportive, companionable approach. As Howe (2009) states, it is essentially about 'mind meeting mind' and a shared understanding.

Ward talks about the toll the work can take on students and practitioners. He refers to the 'considerable cost' in working explicitly with the relationship dynamic in social work practice

:

… and the potential cost to the individual worker's self and morale.

Engaging repeatedly and intensively with people whose lives are in turmoil or uncertainty and whose personal feelings may be full of pain, distress, anger and confusion, will inevitably take its toll on the worker. Unless the worker knows how to handle emotions such as these, the emotions will build up and take a cumulative toll, leading potentially to stress and other reactions' (Ward, 2018, p.189)

Drawing on the OK Corral Grid (Stewart and Jones, 1987) it is an 'I'm Ok, you're Okay' relationship that needs to be achieved followed by a '*then they are also okay relationship*'. Student's need to feel comfortable within the process of assessment on placement so they can 'practice to practice'. Heightened levels of anxiety and fear can lead to students wanting 'to shadow others' far beyond the induction period and actively avoid learning opportunities where they feel exposed and vulnerable. They essentially become a shadow of a social work student.

Example 2

Olanna required a very direct and honest approach in supervision with a very proactive plan at the midpoint to propel the student forward. This was a catalyst for the student who was very anxious and could not move from reflection and theorising into action for fear of getting it wrong. They reflected on their need to be perfect and when we discussed how this was not possible within the messy realities of life. The practice teacher reassured her that it was just about doing the best job and making the best decisions with the information, skills and knowledge you have at the time. Following the midpoint, Olanna self-propelled in terms of proactively seeking out and engaging in learning opportunities and became involved in a very difficult trafficking case and excelled beyond her own expectations.

This example demonstrates how the trusting relationship built up in

supervision contributed to the student's confidence in their use of self and their own self-efficacy (Howe, 2008). Morrison (2005), describes this as a 'blocked cycle' where a student is stuck in either reflection or analysis and this is preventing actual practice. It is imperative to build a working relationship between practice teacher and student that is based on trust, and as with attachment, a 'zone of proximal development' (Reber *et al.,* 2009) where a student is confident to try new things and push themselves. The 'use of self' by the practice teacher is essential and thus a knowledge of who you are as person and as a professional and how you do things is imperative. The practice teacher models this use of self and thus assists the student becoming more confident in *their own* use of self. The practice teacher also opts for an authoritative approach and an 'I'm okay, you're okay' relationship. In their article on relationship-based practice (Ingram and Smith, 2018) encapsulate this by describing Social Work as a 'self in action' task in which workers operate at the contact boundary where two (or more) individuals come together (Fewster, 2004). Hennessey (2011) also states that the task of relational work is to both *offer self*, whilst simultaneously *sustaining self*. A revisiting of the supervisory contract, and the learning outcomes on placement assists the student's understanding regarding the need to demonstrate their practice in order to inform the assessment. The elements of relationship-based practice, including trust, congruence, honesty, are essential here. Reassurance is given that mistakes are permitted, and are, in fact, an essential part of the learning process and the development of practice skills and knowledge base. It is a difficult and courageous but necessary conversation (Finch, 2017), which acts as a catalyst for change for the student and actually topples the block that had been rendering her inactive (Morrison, 2005).

Using theory, building theory

Relationship-based practice pivots around a number of theories, the most relevant being attachment theory. Crittenden (2000) looks at attachment as a way of how the mind processes information when it is threatened and how that then influences the relationships people have. They refer to attachment as a lifelong interpersonal strategy which reflects a person's intra-personal strategy for processing information. When under threat, individuals resort to coping strategies. Successful attachment is important

developmentally as it is 'goal directed' and leads on to successful goal directed and collaborative behaviour (Marvin and Britner, 1999). This 'goal directed partnership' is what is required to be achieved in the supervisory relationship. The more secure students' relationships are with attachment figures, the more optimal their learning experience will be. Conversely, the more insecure their experiences of attachment figures, the more difficult the learning experiences may be for them. The supervisory relationship between practice teacher and student can thus form a secure base for the student, but this will be highly challenging for some and will require skill, perseverance and kindness on the part of the practice teacher. Trust and security built up in supervision within the secure relationship with the practice teacher leads to more honest and dynamic discussions as the student is able to express themselves more freely and open up about any difficulties or challenges they are facing. Trevithick (2003) states that:

> The greater the trust, respect, concern and practice competence that is generated, the greater the likelihood of an open and honest exchange where individuals can reveal what they see to be happening, and why, and how the situation can be improved. On the other hand, in situations where service users-and practitioners- feel defended, guarded and self-protective, it can be difficult to establish a solid foundation on which to build future work. (*ibid*, 2003, p.69)

Psychological theories are very important to your reflections 'on' and 'in' practice (Schön, 2016). Boud and Walker (1990) refer to the act of 'noticing' in learning: Noticing is an act of becoming aware of what is happening in and around oneself. It is active and seeking, although it may not be formally planned: it involves a continuing effort to be aware of what is taking place in oneself and in the learning environment (*ibid,* 1990). Within the placement this hopefully leads on to 'perspective transformation', a term used by Mezirow (1981) and a fundamental shift in how students perceive the world and their relationship to it. Practice teachers have a key role in facilitating and enabling this fundamental shift in placement. Indeed the transformation I see in my students in terms of growth of confidence, self-awareness, emotional attunement, connectedness and use of self is one of the reasons that keeps me practice teaching because I know how important that is for the people they go on to support. Following on from Dartington's reference to holding two faces, it is important to apply this 'noticing' in supervision (*ibid*, 2010).

Sometimes relationships need to be intercepted and efforts need to be made in a congruent way to re-shift an imbalance. We can draw on transactional analysis for our assistance here. The relationship between student and supervisor should be one in which two adult ego states are conversing. Berne asserts that:

> … from time to time people show noticeable changes in posture, viewpoint, voice and vocabulary, and other aspects of behaviour. These behaviour changes are often accompanied by shifts in feeling. In a given individual, a certain set of behaviour patterns corresponds to one state of mind, while another set is related to a different psychic attitude, often inconsistent with the first. These changes give rise to the idea of ego states. (Berne, 1964, p.23)

Berne calls these three, different ego states, psychic realities. These are:

1. Ego states that resemble parent figures
2. Ego states which are autonomously directed towards an objective appraisal of reality and
3. Ego states that represent archaic relics, still active ego states fixated in early childhood.

These exhibitions are referred to more simply as parent, adult and child. Depending on a student's past experience or 'internal model of attachment', one can sometimes find a supervisory relationship slipping into an interchange between a parent and child ego states. The supervisor can find themselves being pushed and cajoled into the role of a critical or nurturing parent and it is important to 'notice' this and swing the relationship back into an adult to adult conversation. This is particularly difficult when it comes to the provision of constructive criticism by the practice teacher. The placement is very much a journey of self for the student. A student needs to be psychologically robust enough to be 'fit for practice' by the end of placement and depending on the 'readiness' of the student socially, psychologically and physically for practice, the road can either be smooth, or very bumpy indeed.

Transactional analysis is a good theory to apply when trying to analyse what might be going wrong. As a practice teacher, it is important to 'notice' when a transaction appears to be crossed and a student may be slipping into a child ego state and you into the critical or nurturing parent or vice versa. Berne states that:

The adapted child is the one who modifies his behaviour under the Parental influence. He behaves as father (or mother) wanted him to behave; compliantly or precociously, for example. Or adapts himself by withdrawing or whining'. (Berne, 1964, p.26)

Example 3

At the start of supervision, Josh presented in a child ego state advising how a previous supervisor had been quite 'parental' in her approach, for example helping with life skills in terms of being physically presentable. Writing was not submitted and there was a submissive, overwhelmed, childlike presentation in supervision. The practice teacher was very aware that they needed to shift the dynamic very quickly to an adult to adult ego state transaction. They were very direct with this and also quickly raised the issue of work missed without explanation as to why this hadn't been done. This was a difficult but necessary conversation however it triggered a 'waking up' on behalf of the student. This would have been upsetting for the student to hear, but this honest, congruent conversation did ignite their 'adult self'. Work was submitted in advance of deadlines and real progress was made in terms of writing with the student achieving better grades.

What was needed here was to correct the 'crossed states' of adult to child, or perhaps even, parent to child and realign it to an adult to adult transaction. This required an authoritative approach and an honest, congruent conversation that was completely transparent, but that was carried out with kindness and a level of empathy. This helped the student refocus on the task in hand and reminded them that they were preparing for a professional role and must therefore present professionally, respect the process of placement and adhere to deadlines. This was an important 'courageous conversation' to have at the earliest possible opportunity and reflected the previously identified need to 'set up your stall' correctly. The student went on to excel in placement and reflected back that their academic marks had also risen considerably. This demonstrates the benefits to the students, of honest, early intervention and difficult conversations that are had with kindness (Finch, 2017).

Psychologically theories come into play with terms like transference, counter transference, project identification and mirroring (See Morrison (2005) for a detailed description). These are important to understand because it helps to unpick difficulties that may arise. This is essentially where a previous or current relationship creeps into the supervisory

relationship. The important thing here is to *notice* and to question, enquire and discuss openly in order to achieve perspective transformation.

It is not always possible to get past student's well-fortified defence mechanisms or self-made walls. The placement is the time when these can come to the fore. Jopling reminds us that:

> … those who are knowledgeable are better equipped for the practical realities of life than those who suffer from self delusionment. (*Ibid*, 2000, pp. 4-5)

Luft and Ingham's Johari's window (1955) is relevant here particularly with the 'blind' and 'hidden self' quadrants of the Johari windows being exposed to the student's 'open self' through the process of supervision and assessment. On placement, the student will not only be confronted by the harsh realities of other people's struggles in terms of abuse, mental health difficulties, structural inequalities and social injustice; they are also confronting their own *self* and their own personal and professional journey in respect of their 'use of self'.

Morrison (2015) discusses the importance of understanding defence mechanisms when it comes to student supervision where 'anxiety produces unconscious behaviours'. Morrison states that:

> Anxiety, risk and stress can cause regressive and defensive activity which distorts the perception of the difficult reality and thus provides a way of coping'. (Morrison, 2005, pp 283-284)

They go on to say that these defensive strategies are 'unconscious' and thus 'inappropriate' for dealing with real situations and 'the resulting irrationality creates fantasies about how we relate to others, which fuels dysfunctional behaviours and actions'. It is therefore important to be aware of all these psychological dynamics in order to notice them and head them off at the pass.

'Enemies' of the heart

Relationship-based practice has fallen in and out of favour across the years. It is by no means an end in itself but a 'cornerstone' on which all social work practice is built. Social work moved away from this in the 1980s

and 1990s when a managerial, mechanistic, business model of social work took precedence (Ingram and Smith, 2018). Social Workers were having to 'ride the juggernaut' of modernity as best they could (Giddens, 1990: 152). Ferguson (2005) describes this as the 'sanitisation' of social work and there have been many articles on the impact of managerialist, procedural style on the eroding or practice (Munro, 2011). Trevithick's (2003) seminal article noted the decline in the value placed on the relationship during this time and the intellectual purge of social work education which accompanied it. The work of Menzies-Lyth provides a stark warning against this distancing of self and professional detachment. Her seminal paper 'The functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety' (1970) was triggered by the vast unexplained turnover of nursing staff. It focused on the professional detachment she observed in hospital systems as being a defence mechanism against the anxieties raised by caring for people in life and death situations. She wrote:

> By establishing a rigid hierarchy, fixing psychological roles and a routinisation of work, the hospital was able to diffuse responsibility and anxiety from the individual nurse to the system as a whole. That benefit came, however at a cost: the use of primitive defences of splitting, denial and projection preventing the more mature forms of coping with anxiety to emerge and stifled individual growth. (cited in Aiyeqbusi and Clarke-Moore, 2008, p.56)

Hoggett (2015) states that social defences against strong emotions 'can easily overwhelm us. It follows that we defend ourselves not just against anxiety, but any experience that threatens to overwhelm us' (*Ibid, 2015,* p.57). Walsh (2018) states that the one way in which we avoid being overwhelmed is to erect either physical or psychological boundaries, and these boundaries prevent contamination. If rigid, such boundaries can stifle individual growth for both the student and the practice teacher and lead on to the dangers warned by Menzies Lyth. Practice teaching in such a climate can only lead to a student being stifled and blindly following process. I recall Siobhon McLean keynote speech to a Scottish Confederation of Practice Teachers in September 2016, where she points to the fact that social workers do not merely follow maps but they *are*, themselves, the map makers. This is an important distinction for students embarking on professional training. Despite the existence of policies and procedures, there is actually no rule book and good practice is an amalgamation of knowledge, skills and values with relationship

building being at the heart of practice. Psychological walls and defence mechanisms must be noticed and discussed openly, no matter how painful or difficult a discussion it may be. Otherwise they will topple and risk crushing the placement or block the travellers from continuing on the placement journey. The placement is a journey of professional growth and requires all the elements of relationship-based practice to progress. It therefore requires honesty, congruence and 'courageous conversations' (see Finch, 2017). The practice teacher may offer themselves as a relational and reparative resource to the student (Hennessey, 2011). It is about simultaneously *knowing self, offering self* and *sustaining self* and *knowing, doing and being* (Steckley, 2020).

Conclusion

The supervisory relationship acts as both a vehicle to facilitate learning and also as a prototype of how relationships should work. By virtue of parallel process it models a 'here and now' example of how the student should work with the people they support by virtue of parallel process (Emond et al., 2018). The relationship, therefore, is the learning. Drawing on an eclectic mix of attachment theory, psychodynamic and systems theories, transactional analysis and others, the practice teacher can look with two faces upon the supervisory relationship in order to pick up cues, notice and transform the ongoing relationship, thus modelling to the student how to adjust and respond to ongoing difficulties with the people they support. In order to 'strengthen social work', we need to refocus on the importance of the relationship and the key elements of relationship-based practice (Munro, 2011), to help students, in the words of Octavia Hill in her 1869 address: '… to grow and to shine' (Woodruffe, 1962). I have demonstrated the parallel process at work in my own supervisory relationships and the observed practice on placement. More research is needed into the direct impact of relationship-based practice on people who use social work services, 'the indirect beneficiaries', to demonstrate impact (Lambley, 2019, Carpenter et al., 2013).

People remember how you were with them, how you are, and not really what you do. Amidst all the bad relationships, modelling how a good relationship can be is a step to people relearning what to expect and how they deserve to be treated. It helps them to 'set up their stall' differently

and teaches other people to treat them the right way, the way they indeed deserve. It also builds student's confidence in their use of self, competence and self-efficacy. Going back to Maslow's quote, in order to be comfortable in one's relationship with others, you first need to be comfortable with yourself and your use of self. This chain reaction starts at the heart of the placement with the relationship between practice teacher and student, and extends down the future chain of relationships the student will have with the people they go on to support. Students are set within the wider ecological context of the placement, and accordingly the systems in which that placement operates. (Coulter et al., 2020).

I say to my students, Social Work chooses you, you don't choose it. You need to look for the small changes, the small rewards. You are never going to change the world in a day but you will save lives and you might be that *one* person, who is there for that *someone*, who is alone in a maternity ward, surrounded by other people with lots of visitors and giant balloons. That relationship might be the thing that 'gets them through'. Relationship-based practice is not easy, it is indeed a 'deeply messy business' (Howe, 2009, p.159) that needs to engage, deeply, directly and whole-heartedly with the 'messy realities' of life (Ruch et al., 2010, p.34). It is a pile of tangled wool that needs to be unravelled, wound up and ordered into balls. It requires us to roll our sleeves up and get stuck in. It requires two faces and two sets of eyes, with a view on the surface and a view to the depths that may be hidden from the student. All this whilst negotiating a tightrope of contradictory feelings and defence mechanisms and erected psychological walls. A relationship-based approach is therefore collaborative, not confrontational; congruent and respectful, not indulgent or neglectful; and, essentially, it is *kind*. It requires transparency and honesty. If we enter the supervisory relationship with our stall set up correctly, we can model how students can also be effective helpers with their stall also set up correctly and solid foundations for their future practice.

Simmonds illuminating quote encapsulates the essence of relationship-based practice:

> The more we can create a space inside ourselves that has capacity to relate to where service users find themselves, the more effective we will be. The more supervision starts with where the supervisee is, not where we wish them to be, the more effective it will be. The greatest resource is that which exists inside us and between us, if only we can bear to look'. (Simmonds, 2018, p.235)

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