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Keeping the child in mind – supporting reflective practice in frontline social work: Royal Borough of Greenwich

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Brief description

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has strengthened reflective and child-focused practice by creating a team of professional educators. The scheme was initially introduced to support newly qualified staff. Child-centred practice and enhanced capacity for reflection is promoted by 3.5 full-time equivalent, highly experienced social workers, with frontline management experience. Professional educators provide mentoring, coaching and resources for development. The scheme has successfully contributed to improvements in the quality of practice and the retention of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) in the borough, increasing the stability of the workforce.

Overview – the provider’s message

‘We believe the recruitment and retention of a stable workforce is the bedrock of a good service. We recognised that we needed to recruit a high percentage of newly qualified social workers to fill vacancies and we felt we needed to do something differently to combat the high drop-out rate seen nationally. We saw the value of the NQSW scheme but wanted to fill the gap that can occur on its completion. The professional educators provide additional support in real situations – modelling, coaching and offering space for reflection and development, including the development of emotional resilience. In response to an improvement plan, following a peer review, the scheme was extended to all social work staff and has contributed to the re-balance in the department towards child-focused practice.’

Andrew O’ Sullivan, Senior Assistant Director, Safeguarding and Social Care

The good practice in detail

Defining the role of the professional educators

Professional educators form a small team of highly experienced social work practitioners, with varied backgrounds but all holding extensive experience as practitioners and managers. In setting up the scheme, senior managers identified that where other similar arrangements were successfully in place, the post holders were not case holders. Consequently the professional educators are not case holders and their role is clearly removed from that of the line manager. Management decisions are not made by professional educators. They provide additional space for reflection and the exploration of possible alternative actions supporting the practitioner to reach informed decisions and develop authoritative practice. This scheme recognises the difficulties for managers in busy frontline teams to provide consistent, regular, high-quality reflective supervision and addresses this by providing additional dedicated capacity outside the line management arrangements.

Professional educators are flexible in offering a range of supportive interventions on a one-to-one or team basis. In addition to offering space for reflection, they provide consultation, undertake observations, joint visits and provide resources such as tools for direct work, messages from research and serious case reviews. They also undertake some case file audits which provide practitioners with a template for action.

The professional educators describe their primary objective as to improve outcomes for children and young people and see their role as ensuring that 'the focus remains on the child and not on the process'. The introduction of their role has increased the climate of challenge in the department. It has seen practitioners increasing in confidence, developing their professional skills and exercising professional judgement, keeping the child at the centre of their thinking throughout.

The benefits to frontline staff

Professor Eileen Munro in her final report *A child-centred system* emphasised that 'to be able to practice well, social workers have to be employed in an organisation that supports them and their professional development'. Newly qualified and more experienced social workers appreciate the input from professional educators. NQSWs identified a number of benefits of the scheme:

- Professional educators are an accessible means of support, complementary to supervision received from line managers.
- A safe space is provided to explore professional issues, values and challenges.
- Practitioners have improved their professional skills, for example in report writing, producing child-focused chronologies, and completing direct work with children.
- Practitioners' confidence has increased as a result of the increased opportunity for reflection and the coaching provided in real, frequently challenging situations.
- Practitioners feel valued by the scheme and see it as an investment in them.

More experienced social workers value 'space for me' and see time with professional educators as an opportunity to avoid becoming complacent, to re-connect with underpinning values and, as an aid to keeping up to date with learning from research and serious case reviews. One commented that the professional educator 'really helped with helping me get my head around new procedures, and what was clearly expected from me within these procedures'. Others value the motivation they gain from their involvement with the professional educators and find it helpful in developing their careers.

Initially some managers were sceptical and considered that the funding would have been better used in creating additional social work posts. Almost three years after the scheme's inception, this view has changed significantly. The role of the professional educator is highly valued with one saying 'as a manager I'm hugely grateful that they are there focusing on the reflective role'. Another saw the professional educator as a 'helpful resource' considering it supplementary to supervision, enabling practitioners to come to supervision better prepared, to be more challenging of themselves and of their managers. Managers value the coaching and modelling role the professional educators undertake in real situations such as core group meetings or home visits. They consider the presence of a professional educator does not alter the power dynamic of the situation in the manner the presence of a manager would and allows the interaction to remain between the social worker and the service user.

In some instances, managers and professional educators meet to plan the work to be undertaken by the professional educator and on some occasions three way meetings are held between the practitioner, manager and professional educator. Where necessary the professional educator contributes to improving practice as part of the capability procedures. Neither managers nor professional educators identified conflict or blurred boundaries between their roles.

The impact on performance and outcomes for children and young people

Ofsted's report *High expectations, high support and high challenge* showed that 'the provision of effective support to front-line staff was clearly linked to effective child protection planning that improved outcomes for children, young people and their families. Being well supported helped social workers to be clear about the purpose of their work and to feel confident, contained and safe.' The report also commented on the locally created arrangements designed to increase the level of support and challenge provided to front line practitioners. In the Royal Borough of Greenwich, social workers, managers and professional educators are exceptionally positive about the beneficial impact that the scheme has on outcomes for children and young people.

One young person wrote to thank his social worker for making sure he was listened to when moving from care to live with a family member. Keeping the child in mind led to the young person's father being located and assessed and a successful residence application being made. This was achieved by the social worker, with the support of the professional educator, while the young person's mother was advocating for him to be placed in Africa or the USA with other family members.

One newly qualified social worker described the support she was given by her professional educator in writing a section 7 court report; the professional educator posed questions for her consideration and helped her prepare how she would present her evidence in court. The social worker said she 'spoke from the child' maintaining the focus on the needs of the child in her evidence and that she 'did not let the child down' and grew in confidence as a result of her experience of court.

Case file audits have identified:

- improvements in the quality of assessments
- assessments better informing plans
- plans becoming more child-centred.

While the audits have not identified a direct causal link between the work of the professional educators and the improvement in practice, frontline staff, managers and senior managers all believe they have made a significant impact and contributed to this improvement.

A stable structure

One of the prime objectives of the scheme was to improve outcomes for children by increasing the stability and performance of the workforce. The first tranche of NQSWs who were affected by the scheme have now been employed for over two years with a large majority of them remaining in practice in the borough. One social work manager said 'those social workers that were newly qualified two years ago are amazing social workers and they work for us'.

Senior leaders have recognised the value and success of this approach by the preservation of the scheme in the recent re-structure of the department. They have demonstrated their support and commitment by continued funding for the professional educator role in the budget for 2013/14.

Provider background

The [Royal Borough of Greenwich](#) is an inner London borough in south-east London, ranked as the 28th most deprived local authority in England and the 8th in London based on the [Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2010](#). It is a borough of great contrasts and diversity with some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Britain. Children's social care has recently been restructured and safeguarding and social care, whose practitioners are supported by the professional educator scheme, comprises: a multi-agency safeguarding hub, four assessment and support teams, a pre-birth support and assessment team, eight children and families in need teams, a family solutions team, five looked after children's teams, five young people's teams, a fostering team, and an adoption team.

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