Safeguarding Children: Exploring the Interfaces Between Policy, Pedagogy, Psychology and Practice
Caroline Humphrey
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What is This?
Safeguarding Children
Exploring the Interfaces Between Policy, Pedagogy, Psychology and Practice

CAROLINE HUMPHREY
University of Hull, UK

Abstract
- **Summary**: This article explores the predicaments involved in educating the next generation of social workers in Britain in child protection work. It draws upon research with students taking a Safeguarding Children module.
- **Findings**: Although the management of risk is central to the role of qualified social workers and the rationale for recruiting more students onto the new degree programmes, only a small minority of students are seriously committed to child protection work, and rather more students are planning to avoid it. Opportunities to test out students’ aptitudes in the field are vital, but there is a dearth of statutory placements and some students emerge even more disheartened from their placements. Pedagogic strategies which promote an integration of therapeutic and statutory interventions can enhance students’ interest, but lack credibility if these approaches are not integrated in practice.
- **Applications**: The relevance of these findings to universities, community-based agencies and central government is considered in the final section.

Keywords: child protection pedagogy policy practice student psychology

Introduction

This article explores four sets of interfaces in educating the next generation of social workers in child protection work. Part I offers an outline of the interface between regulating and researching social work education in Britain in order to contextualize the substantive issues at stake, as well as my own study of a Safeguarding Children module. Part II surveys the personal–professional interface in child protection with reference to students’ motivations for choosing this optional module; their prior conceptions of child abuse; and their
reflections upon their own suitability for dealing with it. Part III examines the education–employment interface in child protection with reference to students’ experiences of this work; their evaluation of the module; and the impacts of university-based and community-based learning upon career intentions. In Part IV I shall draw out some of the implications of these findings with reference to the interface between policies, practices and resources.

Part I: The Regulation–Research Interface

The Regulatory Reform of Social Work

Public sector professions in Britain have been subjected to extensive regulatory reform by the New Labour Government. In social work the concrete manifestations of this include National Occupational Standards to specify Key Roles against which students will be assessed (TOPSS, 2002); a Code of Practice for all social care personnel (GSCC, 2002); new degree programmes with a prescribed curriculum (DoH, 2002); and a revamped audit and inspection apparatus to preside over the implementation of these reforms.

The rationale for such regulatory reform is rooted in the role of social workers as agents of the state. The statutory sector remains the chief employer of qualified social workers in Britain, in contrast to the situation in most of Western Europe, North America and elsewhere (Hetherington et al., 1997; Shardlow and Doel, 2002). Most social workers are funded by taxpayers’ money to undertake functions of care and control in relation to vulnerable publics as dictated by law and policy, and the state therefore has legitimate authority to prescribe curricula, job descriptions and ethical standards as well as to monitor the performance of its agents. A large proportion of the workload of qualified social workers in statutory children and families teams is devoted to child protection issues as a result of legislative guidance and political imperatives, as well as resource shortages and adverse publicity which reduce the scope for preventative work (Balloch et al., 1999; Brammer, 2003).

The ongoing series of tragedies and inquiries in respect of vulnerable citizens has contributed to this. The media tends to single out the deaths of child citizens more than the deaths of other citizens, to seize upon the role of social workers more than the roles of other professionals, and to castigate them for their incompetence in acting precipitously or not acting at all (Parton, 2006). The truth in these allegations must be separated out from the injustice of trial-by-media. In recent years social workers have failed to detect what might appear to be quite obvious cases of maltreatment of children such as Victoria Climbié; they have failed to entertain the possibility of abuse in other contexts, as in the case of JAS who was killed by his prospective adopters; and media stories may be the tip of the iceberg (Home Office, 2004). Moreover, social care staff can be guilty of abuse themselves – inquiries into residential homes have
uncovered regimes designed to facilitate the perpetration of physical and sexual abuse of young people by senior staff who had been charged with their care (Corby, 2006). It is not surprising that there are ongoing difficulties in staffing child protection teams.

Dovetailing the need to increase the quantity of qualified practitioners with the need to improve their competence in safeguarding vulnerable citizens is crucial. The Government created incentives for students to embark upon the new degree by providing bursaries and advertising the caring side of social work, but such measures will only translate into better child protection services if a significant proportion of these students have an interest in child protection work and if their interest is carefully nurtured by staff in both university and community settings. So far these campaigns seem to have had maximum appeal for young female students who have a sincere desire to help others, but limited experience or knowledge of the statutory side of social work. Key Role 4 of the National Occupational Standards stipulates that all students must prove that they are able to assess, manage and minimize risks in order to safeguard service-users, carers, families and communities, as well as themselves and their colleagues (TOPSS, 2002). The Code of Practice also has the protection of service-users from harm as its centre-piece (GSCC, 2002).

Research into Social Work Education

Researching social work education has acquired heightened significance in the aftermath of these reforms. My own research in this area is akin to a patchwork quilt in the making, and the aim of this article is to examine the strands which make up a particular patch. Other patches are being woven from surveys and interviews with students; discussions with academic tutors, practice teachers and social services managers; and a documentary analysis of student portfolios. Readers will appreciate that these other patches, as well as the sewing materials used by the weaver, will exert their effects upon the contours and colouring of any given patch.

During 2004/5 I invited all students on pre-qualifying programmes who were taking Safeguarding Children modules to participate in round-table discussions at the beginning and end of the teaching. In total, 58 students had opted for these modules and they were at very different stages of their learning. MA students were in Year 1 prior to the commencement of their practice learning opportunities in the community; BA students were in Year 2 and had just emerged from their first placement; DipSW students were in Year 3 and had completed their final placement. Over half of the students were in their early 20s; the majority were non-disabled women from white British backgrounds; there were seven men, four students from ethnic minorities and four students with disabilities.

The students were all exposed to the same lectures but they were split up into programme-specific groups for seminars, and each group had a different set of assignments. The module was organized as shown in Table 1.
In total, five round-table discussions were held with 53 students attending three seminar groups in the first week, and 38 attending two seminar groups in the final week. The operationalization of this strategy may be of interest to other researchers.

In terms of the rationale, my own situation was that I had been appointed to design, deliver and evaluate a new module on child protection (for insider stakeholders), and to do qualitative research with an ethnographic dimension into professional education (for wider audiences). On a pragmatic level the strategy of tape-recording discussions with my own students during the Safeguarding Children module appeared to be an ideal opportunity for combining these aims. This strategy appears to be innovative in social work, although it has precedents in education action research.9

In terms of ethics, students were aware that I was conducting a piece of evaluative research in relation to the module which could result in published papers as well as institutional reports. Participation in the first and final seminars was voluntary and it was made clear that students could attend and simply listen to the debate if they were interested in the issues but unsure about voicing their views. The decision to tape-record the discussions was made on a group-by-group basis, depending upon the collective consensus which emerged, and the option of turning off the tape was in place – all discussions started with the tape on, but sometimes it was turned off.

Confidentiality and anonymity were ground-rules for all participants – my own pledge was that I would not discuss this material with other staff or identify individuals in reports, but students were also expected to refrain from discussing each others’ stories outside the group. It is worth mentioning that all students undertake compulsory research modules in their first year which cover such matters in some depth.

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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>International contexts</td>
<td>Round-table discussions (optional)</td>
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Table 1 Safeguarding Children module outline

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Confidentiality and anonymity were ground-rules for all participants – my own pledge was that I would not discuss this material with other staff or identify individuals in reports, but students were also expected to refrain from discussing each others’ stories outside the group. It is worth mentioning that all students undertake compulsory research modules in their first year which cover such matters in some depth.
In terms of implementation, the hybrid nature of these round-table discussions rendered them both ‘like’ and ‘unlike’ teaching seminars, focus groups and module evaluations. The discussions were open-ended insofar as I was interested in finding out whatever students wanted to tell me within three broad parameters, i.e. their prior experiences and conceptions of child abuse and child protection work; their career intentions; and their evaluation of the module including its impacts, if any, upon their prior conceptions and future intentions. There was an atmosphere of apprehension at the outset of the discussions in the first week to the point where I was questioning the wisdom of this exercise; but it only took strong comments from one or two students to spark off a chain-reaction among the wider group, and since there were several of these chain-reactions the end-product was a lively debate. If the ‘chain-reaction’ resulted in a chorus of agreement between a vocal majority on an issue, I interrupted it at a certain point in order to ask whether other students had divergent opinions or experiences they wanted to share. The fact that different groups were at different learning stages contributed to the uniqueness of each discussion, so I compensated for this by asking students in all groups for information on a few specific items (e.g. if they had any experience of dealing with a child protection case or were planning to work in this area).

In terms of impacts, my sense is that these debates promoted sharing and bonding which enhanced the quality of the teaching, learning and module evaluation. However, they also spawned certain dilemmas. For example, my roles as a teacher and module evaluator were paramount; by linking them with my role as researcher into wider issues I became the repository for stories which at times were personally, professionally and politically sensitive; by responding sensitively to these stories I became the first port of call for students in crisis hence augmenting a pastoral role; but by the end of the module my role of assessor was paramount. Such a strategy can increase the potential for role conflicts, although this is an inescapable feature of ethnography in one’s home territory.10

The rest of the article is an analysis of the key themes which emerged from my transcriptions of these tape-recordings, together with some illustrative excerpts. On occasions this has been supplemented by other material, including a survey of Year 1 BA students (Part II), an ethnographic journal of my own teaching experiences (Part III) and dialogues with teaching staff in the university and community (Part IV).

Part II: The Personal–Professional Interface

Setting the Scene

Social work educators have long been cognizant of the umbilical cord linking the personal to the professional. Traditional training emphasized the reflexive use of the self as a resource in casework, presupposing that there is relevant life-experience to be processed and applied (e.g. England, 1986). There is a
general recognition that our quest to operate in an anti-oppressive manner is likely to be advanced by a workforce which reflects the diversity and disadvantage in our service-user population along the dimensions of gender, disability, ethnicity and sexuality (see Lewis, 1996; Humphrey, 2002). This interpenetration of the personal and the professional becomes rather more controversial when what social workers share with their service-users consists of a history of childhood abuse and/or mental ill-health and/or domestic violence. Research by the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse (1996) found that one in three of the 1300 social workers who returned the questionnaire had suffered abuse or neglect in their own childhood. A survey of 43 first-year social work students by Christie and Weeks (1998) revealed that personal life-experiences were significant in the career choice for three out of four students. These revolved around two themes: that of ‘lack/loss’ (where poverty and single parenthood featured most strongly), and that of ‘shock/trauma’ (where being subject to parental abuse as a child and/or partner abuse as an adult were the most common experiences). My own survey of 80 Year 1 BA students has revealed strikingly similar student profiles.

Developing Interests in Child Abuse

The Safeguarding Children module is an optional one and students who sign up to it have already acquired an interest in child abuse. The initial set of seminars illustrated that these interests can be located along a personal–professional continuum. However, those who positioned themselves at the extremes of the continuum were determined not to work in child protection. Several MA students had selected the module for purely professional or instrumental reasons: they regarded it as providing ‘core knowledge’ which would serve them well in the future, but their study of labour market trends, inquiry reports and media documentaries had convinced them that child protection was extremely risky to one’s own health and safety, and that it was ‘not a sensible career or life-style choice’. Several BA students had chosen the module for purely personal reasons – they were trying to make sense of their own biographies, which could include their own experiences of social work intervention as a child or as a parent – and they were also planning to avoid child protection work.

Those who specialize in child protection work will be drawn from the pool of students whose interest in this area is simultaneously personal and professional. I could detect three different ‘camps’ here, and my hypothesis is that there may be a distinct ‘core dilemma’ to be navigated by inhabitants in each camp. First, there is a personal-to-professional camp housing those whose personal history of child abuse or neglect served as the foundation for their interest in child protection work. Their core dilemma is to heal their own wounds prior to embarking upon such a career, and then to sustain a separation between self-as-survivor and service-users who may be victims or perpetrators, in order to avoid projecting onto others and/or re-opening their own wounds (Barter, 1997). Some students seek therapy whilst others rely upon friends,
partners and self-help texts; their capacity to articulate and activate this need for recovery differentiates them from survivors who plan to avoid child protection.

Second, there is a professional-to-personal camp housing those who had been deeply affected by their professional contacts with children who had suffered abuse. These people spoke of their frustration at not being able to effectively protect children on account of limitations inherent in their role as ancillary staff without statutory powers, or as professionals without a family and community remit. They construed social work training in terms of empowering themselves to empower child citizens. The following excerpt is from an ex-teacher:

When a child said to me ‘I’m being sexually abused’ I couldn’t do anything to help them and the system didn’t help them. That’s when it all started. I thought ‘If only I could do something to protect them!’ . . . There was this girl – very bright, very beautiful – and she become very withdrawn. I knew something was wrong but she couldn’t speak to me so I asked some of her friends to ask her what the problem was. She then came to see me and told me what her uncle was doing to her. It was really painful. I just couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t do anything! And the uncle was somebody of special standing and the system couldn’t touch him . . . I felt if only I could work with children more directly, in a more powerful way, outside of the classroom.

Those whose interest begins in the life-experiences of others may not have wounds to be re-opened, but they can be wounded by the work, as some students had realized. Their sensitivity to the suffering of others is the well-spring of their commitment, and this renders them vulnerable to vicarious traumatization (McCann and Pearlman, 1990). Their core dilemma will be to retain a strong sense of self to prevent them from absorbing and appropriating the suffering of others ‘as if’ it were their own.

The third camp could be dubbed the ‘personal–professional’ or the ‘professional–personal’ camp insofar as there is a seamless merging of personal experiences and professional aspirations. Here I would locate students who found themselves in a helping role vis-à-vis their siblings or parents from an early age, as well as those who had social work role-models in their family of origin. Although this is a more amorphous camp, the core dilemma for its inhabitants would seem to revolve around their capacity to carve out their own personal and professional identity separate from that imposed by their family of origin. Some students have accomplished this prior to the commencement of their studies. One student explained that her mother, a child protection specialist, had warned her against becoming a social worker, which delayed her entry into the profession for several years. However, she was now equipped with not only an insider understanding of the nature of the profession, but also a strong sense of vocation which transcended parental warnings:

My mother was a social worker . . . She thinks I’m mad [to do SW] [peals of laughter around the room] . . . She literally said ‘You are crazy doing this!’ She really, really
didn’t want me to do it . . . When she was in child protection . . . she used to come home exhausted, tearing her hair out. But I really look up to people who can do that kind of work. For me I think there’s only a few people who can really go into that area of social work and do it well and hopefully I’m going to be one of them.

Other students have not yet severed the umbilical cord and may be tripped up by it during their studies. One of my most capable students, who had been a child-carer in her family of origin, felt forced to exit the degree programme after her disabled mother insisted that the family was unable to cope without their chief carer.

**Overcoming Inhibitions to Child Protection**

It is not just that the student’s interest has to be simultaneously personal and professional, but also that it has to outweigh all other influences if it is to translate into a career specialism. Only eight of the students were planning to specialize in child protection and they did not waver from this; the others were evenly divided into those who had pledged to eschew child protection work at all costs, and those who were ‘keeping an open mind’ and willing to ‘test themselves out’ in the field.

External inhibitors stem from media representations of social work and child abuse. Several students reported that they regretted signing up for the module, having been exposed to media coverage of Victoria Climbié and Bristol Social Services in the intervening period, which left them struggling with alternating waves of revulsion for abusers, pity for victims, despair at professional failings, outrage at resource deficits and fear for themselves:11

I’m scared because of what happened to the social worker in Victoria Climbié. I’m not very confident now. *It’s blown me away*. I think she was scapegoated. There was a write-up about her in the Sunday papers and she was *absolutely annihilated*. It was horrible, horrible. I just thought ‘My God, I couldn’t cope with that!’ . . . It’s flying solo, isn’t it? *The total fear* in my head of *flying solo* in something as intense as that. Where is your line manager? Where is the team? *Where are they?* You’re on your own! I think that is really scary.

These will fuel whatever internal inhibitors are already present. Students reported a generalized anxiety which could be dissected into a number of distinct fears – the fear of making decisions which could spell the difference between health and harm; the fear of making mistakes which would result in self-recriminations and scapegoating; the fear of dealing with parental aggression; and the fear of facing children’s anguish.

The realm of ‘feelings’ seems to be crucial to students’ sense of selfhood and its impacts upon career choices may have been under-estimated. The majority of students testified to their ‘sensitivity’ and were interrogating its implications for their ‘suitability’ for safeguarding others. Sensitivity appeared to be a mixed blessing. Some students felt that they were succumbing to it; they suspected that their empathy for suffering children could get in the way of carrying out the job and have a deleterious impact upon their personal lives:
I’m not emotionally strong. That’s why I asked you earlier ‘How do you cope?’ When I was at [voluntary agency placement] I found it really hard to cope when I got home . . . [inaudible] . . . I would replay the interviews in my mind over and over again. I neglected my own family . . . [inaudible] . . . My professional life got so bound up with my personal life. I’m a religious person and I used to pray for my clients in the night.

Those who identified themselves as ‘sensitive’ but intended to specialize in child protection had to develop a strategy for self-overcoming. One student mobilized her moral and intellectual convictions about the supreme importance of safeguarding children to bracket her emotional sensitivity, and was teaching herself another way of being:

Normally I’m very emotional – even when I’m watching EastEnders I cry! [peals of laughter around the room]. But when I’m in this child protection I feel a strength. I don’t know where it’s coming from but I think it’s because I know that it’s all going to be for the children. I don’t know. I just know that I’ve found this strength inside that I can pull forward. I don’t feel emotional now. It’s simply not there any more. I’ve lost it since being on this degree. I’m still learning it and I’m teaching myself. It’s as if I’ve put this block there and I’ve done it for the sake of the children.

‘Insensitivity’ was also a mixed blessing. A minority of students were worried at their own lack of attunement to the realm of feelings which dominated peer discussions. By the final set of seminars, a few had realized that their capacity for objectivity could be a distinct virtue in child protection, whilst others had decided that they were misfits in the profession and were planning to re-train for alternative careers post-qualification.

The Conundrum of the Open Secret

Social work educators will also be contending with this personal–professional interface. For example, matters of academic progress on the module were typically bound up with life-histories or life-situations. Several BA students failed to attend for their group presentations and it transpired that some had been unable to cope with the material their group was presenting around inquiry reports and domestic violence. Mitigating circumstances for students requesting extended deadlines for the submission of work included cases where counselling for childhood abuse and seeking accommodation after exiting a violent relationship had undermined the emotional and practical capacity to study.

The dearth of policy guidance for staff and students on dealing with such issues suggests that there is a culture of open secrecy in the academy. Everyone knows that a proportion of students will be carrying a legacy of trauma, but no-one knows whether or how staff should be addressing this; everyone witnesses distress or disclosures from students but no-one knows whether or when to share these concerns; in practice it seems that such matters are left to the discretion of individual members of staff. This is a potentially precarious situation for all stakeholders – for student survivors who risk endangering their
own health; for service-users who may endure counter-transference phenomena from students with unresolved issues; and for university staff who have failed to detect contra-indications in student biographies or to deal with disclosures of trauma, particularly for students failing to progress (Barter, 1997).

Part III: The Education–Employment Interface

Setting the Scene
There is substantial research evidence to show that the transition from education into employment is problematic for newly qualified social workers. During the 1980s and 1990s they reported feeling confused about the theories and techniques indigenous to practice and ill-equipped to work in our communities and organizations (see Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Barnes, 2002). Although degree programmes and children’s services are being restructured, commentators have suggested that this will be insufficient to promote more robust safeguarding of vulnerable citizens (see Preston-Shoot, 2004; Reder and Duncan, 2004). Indeed, these are second-order (Beta) changes instigated and implemented by politicians and managers; as such they do not address first-order (Alpha) phenomena such as pedagogy and practices, let alone third-order (Gamma) problems such as poverty and pathology.12

The Government increased the amount of time that students spend in practice learning at the same time as introducing incentives to study the new degree, but this was not matched by more resources for teaching, so the quality of teaching and learning may deteriorate. In my own university the high staff:student ratio is militating against individual and small group tutorials, and the shortage of statutory placements means that students spend half of their practice in non-statutory and non-standard placements, although national research shows that 80% of newly qualified workers will be employed in social services departments (Lyons and Manion, 2004).

Encountering Child Abuse in the Community
In seminars with BA students who had just emerged from their first placement the most common refrain was that safeguarding vulnerable people had not been on the agenda. They seem to have been absorbed into the social care workforce in day care or residential units, or treated as an adjunct of education or health care professionals in community settings. A few of them had come across risky situations which resulted in either a referral to social services or, more worryingly, an instruction to ‘look the other way’. For example, students who were attached to schools were told that their remit was confined to ‘bullying at school’ and that it was dangerous to delve into its origins if this took them into families, since this was ‘social work around family problems’ rather than ‘school work around pupil behaviours’. Their accounts suggested that to cross this divide would create anxiety for staff, anger for parents and antagonism in the teacher–parent relationship:
If we had any alarm bells ringing, thinking ‘This needs more’, it would be ‘Oh, don’t go there! We’re just doing the bullying and you stick with that.’ And that’s what we were told constantly. You can’t touch on the social work!

This is disturbing not only because it runs contrary to official policy, but also because the fears of agency supervisors were contagious, leaving these students more in dread of the day when they might have to take on a child protection case.13

Only 12 students had actually dealt with a child protection case; some were DipSW students whose final placement had been in a statutory children and families team; the others were seasoned social care workers whose previous employment had been in local authorities. Happily, a couple of the DipSW students found that this work experience confirmed their commitment to child protection work, and they reported a huge increase in personal confidence and professional competence. However, a statutory child care placement had the reverse effect on other students. Some had ‘frozen’ at crucial moments – during casework or case conferences – and these moments had not ‘thawed’ over time, so that they had been left with the conviction that they were simply unable to do such work. For example, one student had been allocated a teenage boy with a history of sexual abuse, and although her remit was a practical one of finding accommodation, the act of bearing witness to his suffering left her traumatized:

S: When I was reading through the history – well, I knew that child protection could be distressing, but when I went home I was crying my eyes out ‘cos it was so bad, it was far worse than any sensationalized newspaper account. But then for me it was having to talk with this boy knowing the things that had happened to him. I felt that was quite harrowing, to be quite honest. Although we weren’t talking about these events, I could see how they’d affected him and messed up his life. [student tearful]

CH: . . . My sense is that although you weren’t directly dealing with the abuse, you were carrying the abuse, it was like on your shoulders – am I right?

S: Yes. It was gruesome. I found it hard to even look him in the eye. I know that sounds really awful . . . [inaudible] . . . Just knowing what had gone on. It was me. I know it was me. I felt so uncomfortable with him.

CH: Just looking at him

S: Yeah

CH: Did that improve over time?

S: Well, I only met him on three occasions but I don’t think it improved, to be honest. I couldn’t seem to move away from what had gone on before with him.

There were a few students who claimed that they would not enter into a statutory child care team in principle on the grounds that social workers were bureaucrats whose subservience to the system was dehumanizing to everyone:

S: I came here wanting to work for a local authority but now I never want to work for them . . . In local authorities there’s a lot of paperwork and I know there’s got to be
some of that but I don’t want to be stuck in an office. I want to be working with people!
I didn’t come into this job wanting to be a secretary!

CH: There is a lot of paperwork . . . but it’s not because you’re operating as a secre-
tary . . . It’s about accountability, record-keeping, and in children and families maybe
needing to take cases to court and needing to have evidence-based stuff . . .

S: Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. I don’t want to do it! I only want to work with people!

CH: . . . [T]he pure one-to-one work, the face-to-face work, whether with individuals
or groups or whatever – if you wanted that in its purity you would have to be operat-
ing in an unqualified capacity in a day centre or residential home.

S: Yeah, even the social work assistants have more contact with people than the quali-
fied social workers. I’ve got no faith in the local authority system.

This stance could pose dilemmas for assessment strategies. Is a social work
qualification conditional upon competence in safeguarding at least one group
of vulnerable service-users in a statutory setting? This may be the logical conse-
quence of the National Occupational Standards, but there are cases of students
who graduate without a statutory placement, and there is no explicit policy
guidance on the matter.

Making Sense of Child Protection at the University

Educators will need to equip students to recognize and respond to risks regard-
less of their standpoints. Student feedback on the module was invaluable in
signposting some of the ways forward here, and will be considered in relation
to the three main lecture sequences on child abuse and neglect, law and policy,
and therapeutic interventions.

The lecture sequence on child abuse and neglect contained several photo-
graphs to assist in visual recognition and differential diagnosis, in addition to
theory and research. Students’ faces had registered shock throughout these
presentations but they were unanimous in their verdict that visual aids were
indispensable. Those who had received foundation training from Area Child
Protection Committees claimed that they had become confused by the long lists
of behavioural symptoms without the benefit of any visual aids. Their comments
suggest that seeing may be the prerequisite not only for believing, but also for
seeing itself:

You know it happens, but you don’t want to see it, do you? It helps just to see it – it really helps – because you don’t know what you’re looking for unless you’ve seen it!
It’s like those injuries to the neck – you showed them and explained that you didn’t normally have injuries to the neck ’cos it’s tucked away. That stayed with me. I thought ‘Oh yes!’ but I’d never have thought of it otherwise.

Students also reported that they enjoyed working on case studies. My
impression was that their capacity to undertake multi-dimensional analyses
depended upon repeated opportunities to reflect upon different kinds of case
scenarios. Initially there were proclivities towards constructing scenarios in a
one-dimensional manner in all groups, regardless of the stage of their learning. When presented with scenarios of whole families, most students ignored the fact that these were referrals around child abuse or neglect in their quest to empower disadvantaged parents via the provision of services. When presented with profiles of individual children needing to be looked after, they ignored the parents as well as the parent–child relationship in their quest to secure permanent substitute care. Their approach to the children also tended to be one-dimensional – in relation to a young girl who had been sexually abused they seemed to assume that as long as social workers had ‘empathy with her feelings’ then all would be well; in relation to a teenage boy who was sexually interfering with other children they tended to assume that as long as carers ‘monitored his behaviours’ then all would be well. It was only at the end of the module that students who chose the case study assignment were demonstrating a clear capacity for the multi-dimensional analysis which is so crucial to child protection work.

The lecture sequence on law and policy was most valued by students for its capacity to act as a container for their negative emotions and as a positive channel for their cognitive processes, steering them towards the pragmatics of the situation-at-hand:

S1: My biggest problem about doing child protection work was that it was quite scary . . . That fear is still there, but it’s become more manageable . . .

S2: Well, it was a practical course, which helps you to deal with the other bits. You know, you’ve got to do certain things when you come across these situations.

S3: Yes. It wasn’t just the horrific things. There’s the theory and the law. It’s how you can assist that child and that family. It was presented like ‘Well, that’s happened, but this is a positive thing we can do now to move on from there.’

Nevertheless, the hegemony of law and policy in child protection remains deeply problematic insofar as it is associated with defensive practice which abides by the canons of procedural correctness (Gadsby-Waters, 1992; Reder and Duncan, 2004). The sequence in therapeutic interventions was designed to offset this and proved to be the most popular as students rehearsed techniques in the classroom which could assist them in working with children and parents in an anti-oppressive manner. For my part, I was struck by the need to facilitate their endeavours in experimenting with the squiggle game, ecomaps and genograms with a fellow student. Such tools of the trade all have to be learned and this requires an overcoming of our inhibitions (young adults can be reluctant to return to ‘play’ and school fears about ‘doing art’ can resurface) and a capacity to listen to the stories of others (some pairs resorted to ‘parallel play’ sessions where they drew up their own ecomaps and genograms simultaneously without engaging with their partner). There was also some un-learning for DipSW students who had not been using the correct structure or symbols for the genograms they had drawn up on their placements.
The Chasm Between Statutory and Therapeutic Work

At the end of the module students challenged me on the extent to which therapeutic interventions were compatible with child protection procedures. The few who had been based in child protection teams complained that a chasm separated them:

We’re a child protection team. It’s all assessment-investigation. We don’t do direct work. We do use genograms but I’ve never known anyone to do art-based therapies or play-based therapies, although I think that would be incredibly useful especially for some of the children that I visit who are very damaged and do need to express themselves. And it would be a way for us to get to know them and for them to trust us . . . but I’ve never known a social worker to spend any time doing this.

The therapeutic interventions sequence enhanced students’ interest in therapeutic work with survivors of abuse, but did not dismantle their core conviction that this was incompatible with statutory child protection work. Some reported that they were likely to seek employment in voluntary agencies such as women’s centres; others were contemplating specialist training in play therapy or psychotherapy.

A half-day workshop on child protection for 28 post-qualifying students furnished an opportunity to explore this issue further. Those who worked with looked after children, young offenders, foster carers and adopters regularly made use of basic therapeutic techniques and had access to specialist training. Those who worked in child protection teams insisted that they were ‘case managers’ who wrote reports for conferences and courts and ‘commissioners of services’ who contracted out therapeutic work to other experts. They were adamant that the workload in terms of the volume of referrals, reports and meetings rendered direct work with children and families impossible. Their interest in the possibility of reconciliation was aroused by concrete examples drawn from my own practice, and at the end of the workshop some stayed behind to explain that they wanted to learn these things which could make their own work more meaningful, but that they were scared as they would be operating in a void. They had not learned any of these ways of working during previous training; nor had they heard of the texts, theories or techniques I presented.

A student on an exchange from a European university was shocked by the media portrayal of social work and by student fears around child protection. On the continent the ethos of social work revolves around therapy and pedagogy, and many qualified workers are based in voluntary agencies where they offer counselling and therapy to children and parents on a confidential basis. Although they can take cases to courts, judges are themselves influenced by the social work ethos and may act as mediators between professionals and families in dispute. Although fatalities can occur, social workers have higher public esteem and are not pilloried in the media (see Hetherington et al., 1997). The statutory system in England was designed to safeguard children, but the
welter of prescriptive guidelines constricts the choices for family members and social workers alike, whilst the adversarial judicial system pits children, parents and professionals against each other. The result is that parents may not discuss their troubles with social workers unless they want their children removed; children may retract allegations of abuse when faced with the consequences; and onlookers may be reluctant to make referrals. The system exists to deal with child abuse, but has the public lost faith in the system? Although I shall re-focus upon education in the final part, it is worth remembering that pedagogic practices will be moulded by these professional and political contexts, just as student psychologies will be moulded by these cultural constructions.

Part IV: The Practices–Resources Interface

Revisiting Practices

University practices could be reshaped in the foreseeable future. There is a need to incorporate the personal–professional interface at all stages of social work education, from the admissions process through to tutorial and teaching sessions and then to final assessments. The new degree programmes are heavily dependent upon a new generation of young people whose personal biographies will shape their professional trajectories, and operating at this interface is becoming a survival imperative. In addition, the safeguarding of vulnerable people of all ages could easily be made compulsory modules at pre-qualifying levels and compulsory components of the new post-qualifying programmes.

The task of enhancing practices in the community will be more protracted. There is no doubt that non-statutory and non-standard placements could be improved, but only a massive investment in staff training, or the recruitment en masse of qualified social workers into these agencies, would guarantee a substantial improvement. Yet it is in everyone’s interests to pursue such an agenda – some students would not survive without a sheltered first placement, and some university programmes would not be viable without these partnerships. Simultaneously it is necessary to increase the volume of statutory social work placements in order that everyone can test out students’ abilities to cope with the ultimate task the state has prescribed for social workers, which is to safeguard and service our most vulnerable citizens. It is these placements which are most likely to make or break career aspirations in child protection; when the outcome is ‘break’ rather than ‘make’, this may reflect the juggernaut of the bureaucratic machinery or the Janus-faced nature of role models whose care and commitment has burned out as much as the psychology of individual students. Since safeguarding social workers is the essential prerequisite of safeguarding service-users and safeguarding students, staff care is vital.
Releasing Resources

The dearth of policy guidance from the Government and its regulatory quangos on crucial issues – such as adjudicating upon matters of ‘suitability’ for training and practice alike – has spawned some disenchantment among social work educators. Here I would like to suggest a twofold reframing exercise. On the one hand, it is premature to develop policies in a vacuum, and it is unwise to look to government officials to resolve problems when they have limited first-hand experience of them. For example, a review of the literature suggests that we do not have an adequate understanding about the relationship between personal biography and professional capacity among social workers to apply evidence-based practice to student admissions or assessments. Likewise, a review of inquiry reports shows that the recommendations repeat the mantra about ‘more training’ in safeguarding vulnerable citizens, when there is little evidence about what constitutes ‘enough’ training, let alone ‘better’ and ‘worse’ forms of training. On the other hand, academics would be in an ideal position to conduct their own research locally and nationally, and to develop their own policies and refine their own practices in an evolutionary and evidence-based manner.

The real problem is the lack of resources to improve practices in the present and to undertake the research to guide practices into the future. Social work academics typically service students round-the-year, leaving little scope for research; the increase in students has not been matched by an increase in staff so the servicing of students is itself superficial; and planning for new initiatives such as post-qualifying training is hampered by uncertainties around funding. Community-based agencies typically absorb students into existing accommodation with inadequate facilities; practice teachers in the statutory sector typically absorb students into existing workloads which are already excessive; supervisors in non-statutory and non-standard placements typically absorb students into their own custom and practice which may not always be appropriate. Moreover, there are spiralling problems in our cities, including the imbrication of child abuse with substance misuse, the entrapment of teenagers in paedophilia and prostitution networks, and the plight of asylum-seeking families, which can overwhelm even experienced workers. It is relatively easy to issue a policy – it can usually be done within the workload of existing officials – but it is extraordinarily difficult to secure additional resources for substantive problems. The solution to policy-failures (whether attributed to policy-excess or policy-deficiency) is not more policies, but rather more resources, which are urgently needed by both universities and communities, and this has to be laid at the door of government.

Notes

1. TOPSS is the Training Organization for the Personal Social Services, which has now been reconstituted as Skills for Care (for adult social care) and the Children’s Workforce Development Council. The Key Roles pertain to the assessment of
needs; interventions and their evaluation; participation and promoting advocacy; risk management; agency accountability; and professional competence, which incorporates ethical and evidence-based practice.

2. The Code of Practice represents our first ‘official’ set of ethical standards, which revolve around protecting the rights and interests of service-users; promoting independence; preventing harm to vulnerable people; and earning the trust of diverse publics. It has been developed in tandem with registers for social workers, social care workers and students, and registration is now compulsory.

3. The DoH specifications are that the university curriculum must include law and policy, human development and disability, communication skills, partnership working, and processes of assessment, intervention and evaluation. Ironically, there is no explicit mention of skills or knowledges specific to safeguarding vulnerable people, which means that these can be optional modules (as they were in my own institution, although this is being remedied as a result of curricular changes). The other specification is that students must spend 50% of their time in community-based learning, which has exacerbated pressures upon placement providers.

4. Victoria was an eight-year-old girl from the Ivory Coast who died in 2000 after spending less than a year in London in the care of a pseudo-aunt and her partner; the causes of death included hypothermia and malnutrition induced by deliberate abuse and neglect. Twelve statutory agencies had been involved and the inquiry reported a catalogue of errors from misdiagnoses of injuries (by doctors) to failures to engage with the child (by social workers), all of which unfolded in a context of resource deficits, cultural misconceptions and managerial incompetence (Laming, 2003).

5. JAS was a four-year-old boy who died in 1999, six months after being placed with prospective adopters who subjected him to a regime of physical abuse. Two social workers visited the family regularly but were misled into believing that the child’s recurrent injuries were self-inflicted; one of them came to realize that these could be non-accidental, but he was simultaneously immersed in court proceedings on another case, and JAS died a few days later (Leslie, 2001).

6. My hypothesis is that some kind of ‘splitting off’ of the care and control functions of social work may be at work in the minds of younger recruits. In previous generations most social work students were sponsored by their local authority employers and therefore familiar with the care–control nexus. Mature students are now outnumbered by novices, and it is this re-positioning of the fulcrum which has reconfigured the nature of the study body, and therefore the nature of the pedagogic task.

7. This research has been granted funding by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Hull. It is underpinned by ethnography, as I am drawing upon my roles as admissions tutor, personal supervisor and teacher to formulate hypotheses which are then tested by research strategies wherever feasible.

8. DipSW students were studying for a Diploma in Social Work under the old programmes; BA students are working towards a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work; MA students are reading for a Master of Arts in Social Work on a post-graduate programme.

9. For an overview of the 50-year history of the education action research movement
see Zeichner (2001). These teacher-researchers have been immersed in diverse traditions wedded to diverse aims, including the pragmatic aim of curriculum development, the political aim of developing emancipatory education, and the professional aim of enhancing the reflexivity of the teacher-researcher. One of their strategies has been to deploy tape- and video-recordings of classroom interactions.

10. At present there is no overarching Code of Ethics to govern social work research in Britain (Butler, 2002) and it is arguable that such a Code would not extirpate the role conflicts and ethico-political predicaments associated with ethnography (see Punch, 1994; Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

11. The tense relationship between social work and the media in Britain is explored by Aldridge (1994). The Victoria Climbié inquiry was held in public and broadcast in the media; one social worker refused to attend and was fined; another social worker and her manager gave evidence to the inquiry but were subsequently dismissed by their employer. Bristol Social Services allowed reporters to shadow their child care teams for a year in order to dispel some myths about social work and to reveal the harsh realities facing social workers, resulting in a television series called Someone to Watch Over Me.

12. Reforms to children’s services are laid out in the Children Act 2004, which is primarily about establishing multi-professional teams which will operate to a common assessment framework and access the same data-bases. In themselves, such reforms cannot enhance the capacity of any professional to recognize signs of child abuse, to respond in such a manner that everyone is kept safe, to reflect upon the relevance of cultural contexts, or to facilitate the recovery of a child from trauma. If they could, our existing assessment frameworks, partnership working protocols and child protection registers would presumably have prevented a significant number of tragedies.

13. School-based projects are classified locally as ‘statutory’ placements insofar as they are based in schools and education is a statutory function; however, social care staff attached to these projects have no statutory functions to deal with neglect or abuse; it would therefore be more accurate to categorize them as ‘non-standard’ placements. It is this inflation of the term ‘statutory’ which is enabling some students to qualify as social workers without having had any practice learning opportunities in statutory social work. Nevertheless, it is important to keep an open mind about the proliferating number of non-statutory and non-standard placements – for example, they may pioneer special projects and their staff may have more time for therapeutic work (King et al., 2002).

References


CAROLINE HUMPHREY is Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Hull. She has had previous careers as a local authority social worker specializing in child protection and substitute care; as a political activist in the trade union and civil rights movements; and as a researcher undertaking projects on social work and social movements. Address: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Kingston upon Hull HU6 7RX, UK. [email: c.humphrey@hull.ac.uk]