
Significant Incident Of Social Worker In Interacting With Children

This essay regards a significant incident that occurred during my first social work placement in an educational setting. The incident involves a child who holds negative feelings towards social workers, and how this has affected my practice. Gibbs (1988) suggests a “reflective cycle” which underpins the necessary steps of manipulating an effective reflection; the steps consist of a “description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and an action plan” (cited by Beesley et al, 2018, pg. 15). This essay will incorporate this model throughout, and focus on how I managed the situation, and how I have learnt from this incident, with reference to lifespan theories and communicational skills. It will evidence how I have developed professional competence through learning from this specific event and entails personal reflection to ensure my own future development.

During the time at placement, I was shadowing a hockey lesson of young adolescent students. A student I was introduced to just before the lesson engaged in conversation with me. This is where I remembered the importance of active listening, with the intentions of proving to the service user that I care about what they have to say (Egan, 2002). During this conversation, I disclosed that I was a social work student. This led to ‘M’ replying, “I had bad experiences with my two last social workers in the past, they were rubbish”. I then thought about the topic of anti-oppressive practice, as I did not want to seem over-powering in my response so that it would not disregard the service user’s opinion (Social Work England, 2019). At last, I responded, “oh no that is a shame; social workers should always aim to work with the best interests of the person they are working with”. I also said, “you are always going to have good and bad professionals, a bit like how you think you might have good or bad teachers, because unfortunately not everyone is perfect and not everyone works well together”. The student then agreed and said, “that is why you are here then, to learn so that you can be a good social worker”. I replied with a nod, and returned, “that’s right, I’m learning to become a good social worker, I definitely don’t want to be a bad one”. Then, ‘M’ smiled with a nod in agreement and replied, “that’s good then”. In terms of a strengths-based approach, I responded “you must be very resilient then dealing with two social workers you didn’t really get on with”. The child then said “yeah I suppose so” whilst we continued to walk to the hockey pitch. At this point, we were interrupted by other students, asking me questions of what my name was, and if I was a teacher, as to which ‘M’ replied the answers.

Prior to this incident, I was working with the SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) lead, where we discussed the background of ‘M’. At this time, I found myself appreciating multi-agency work because I valued that the SEND lead knew a lot of information about the individual that would benefit my understanding (Kent and Medway Safeguarding, n.d.). The staff member explained to me that ‘M’ was a looked after child (LAC), who is fostered by and living with her grandparents. After the brief background and history of the service user was explained to me, the staff member introduced ‘M’ to me before her hockey lesson. The child seemed happy to engage in conversation with me, where topics easily flowed between us, such as birthdays and school lessons. After the incident of where she disclosed her negative feelings towards social workers, other students interrupted us, so we engaged in general discussion with them. During the physical education lesson, ‘M’ often stayed with me by my side throughout the lesson and

engaged little with her peers unless I was present in the conversation. At the end of the lesson, we said our goodbyes and parted from the physical education block. Since that day, 'M' engages in a 1:1 session with me weekly, where we complete tailored activities together. Furthermore, after the second 1:1 session we had, the school counsellor that 'M' was previously seeing before me, said that the child visited her office to tell her that she "likes" me, and that I "am much better than her other social workers".

Reflecting on my own thoughts, prior to the incident, I was intrigued to learn the history of the child before meeting them, which I found to be useful as it generated a better understanding of the child before I could form my own interpretations. I firstly found myself empathising with the child when I heard that she was a foster child. My thoughts during the incident, when 'M' disclosed that she had bad experiences with social workers, I felt startled and worried that she would then be defensive towards me. For example, Beesley, et al (2018, pg. 93), explains that resistance and reluctance to work with social workers can arise when individuals consider they are "under threat", which may be as a consequence of their "personal autonomy or someone they care for". The sensitivity of the service users' negative impressions of social workers was significant to acknowledge because it could have unravelled unsettling memories. Favourably, I reflected on my previously learnt communicational skills such as sufficient eye-contact and an open posture (Egan, 2002). As well as social work values, such as anti-oppressive practice, before I replied to the child (Social Work England, 2019). Regarding my response and actions, I empathised with the child. I believe that if I were to become defensive to 'M' about the social work profession, it would be detrimental and unfair because I did not know the relationship's she formed with the social workers previously, which could have been poor practice on their behalves. I found this beneficial as empathy highlighted how I appreciated her feelings. Also, by explaining the role of the social worker, it helped to embed a new positive perspective of the profession and reassure the child. This was evident as she then expressed the concept of a 'good' social worker in her reply, generating a new positive perspective, different from her previous beliefs. After this response, I was relieved that she now did not perceive every social worker poorly, which gave me hope in building a positive relationship with her. Reflecting on the overall incident, I believe that I acted accordingly by empathising and relaying the purpose of a social worker as it generated a positive and willing response, with the service user content with my answers. In addition, it did not push the service user away from me, instead, it built the foundations of an honest and respectful professional relationship.

Nevertheless, supervision also helped to develop my professional competence. Supervision aims to enhance the student's "effectiveness" by providing "theoretical knowledge; professional development; and practical skills" (Ferguson, 2005, pp. 294). The supervision session I had with my practice educator after this incident encouraged me to look at the positives of this incident. For example, it was suggested that I now currently have more of an incentive to better my practice and become the best possible practitioner that I am able to be, to prove to service users that the social work profession is based upon good and helping incentives, and is enforced to provide better outcomes and improve service users quality of life. In addition, another positive that came out of this incident is that it became a learning curve which will ultimately benefit my practice. For example, it allowed for discussion in supervision based on the fact that the social work profession is not ultimately perfect, and some practitioners may have flaws when dealing with real life cases. Moreover, during this supervision time, I reflected on how I acted and responded to the child's statement and used this time to gather feedback on whether I managed the situation appropriately. I found this helpful because it meant that I could then better my practice by understanding how to respond if the situation

was to occur again. Furthermore, it heightened my confidence as the professional educator applauded my reactions and response and claimed that I acted appropriately considering the sensitive and maybe traumatic experiences the child endured.

Theoretical concepts surround social work practice. Regarding non-verbal communication skills, I recalled on Egan's (2002, pg. 68-70) acronym 'SOLER', which stands for facing "squarely, open posture, lean, eye contact, relaxed". This theory concept reminded me how to create an open and comfortable environment for the interaction with the service user. For example, I kept sufficient eye-contact, leant in when answering the service user's question, and had an open posture with uncrossed arms. In addition, I used verbal communication skills, and based my response around empathy by appreciating and responding to the child's statement with empathetic language. Seden (2005, pg. 74-75) describes empathy as "the capacity to enter into the feelings and experiences of another". Within social work, it is important to understand the emotions of the service user and their experiences so that you can respond and advise appropriately. If empathy is non-existent it can impact on service users who are choosing to express their emotions, negatively. For example, Howe (2013, pg. 106 & 110) explains that without empathy, "the world feels harsh, indifferent, less caring, even brutal". This heavily contradicts social work values and ethics, as practitioners should respect service users alongside an empathetic understanding with integrity and non-judgemental traits. Moreover, lifespan theories can also help to highlight the potential reasons for the child's actions and responses. In this case, the student is now a young adolescent, whereas when she experienced and worked with her previous social workers, she was a lot younger. This may explain her positive and welcoming response as to working with me, a student social worker, because she is now old enough to appreciate new experiences. This is highlighted through Gibson and Gibson (2016), when they describe adolescents should move from having very solid, set ideas to valuing that there are different perspectives.

Furthermore, attachment theories can be useful to understand this service user. For example, regarding foster care children, Howe (1995, pp. 110) explains that the child's "previous attachment experiences will initially affect the way they relate to their new caregivers". Therefore, the child may uphold the avoidant attachment theory, where they learn to cope on their own and mistrust other relationships. This makes building relationships hard for the individual, as they do not want to face rejection once again (Howe, 1995). Regarding the physical education lesson that I was present in, the child did not interact well with her peers, and often stayed with me throughout the class. This could be an example of "nonattachment" or an avoidant technique, as Howe explains children who do not have the ability to form close relationships "do not enjoy good peer relations" and "are often unpopular with their agemates" (Howe, 1995, pp. 106). This was later addressed in a 1-1 session after the incident, when the child confided in me that they do not have any friends at school and struggle to get along with everyone. Lastly, in relation to social work theory, I used the strengths-based theory when I applauded the service user for being "resilient". This theory is grounded upon the principle that you focus on working with the strengths of individuals rather than their problems (Pulla and Kay, 2016). This was beneficial to use as it "appears as a powerful way for individuals to create preferred futures for themselves and the communities they live in" (Saleebey, 2009, cited by Pulla & Kay, 2016, pp. 1418-1432). Consequently, it helps to empower the service user which correlates with social work values and ethics (BASW, 2014).

In the British Association of Social Work (BASW) Code of Ethics (2014), it underlines the values and ethics in which social workers should behave. Firstly, whilst upholding the value of human

rights, the guidance outlines supporting people's right to form their own decisions and choices despite our own values (BASW, 2014). Regarding the significant incident, I believe I acted in accordance to this guidance as I respected the service user's decision of viewing social worker's in a negative light, despite my own beliefs of social work being a significantly positive profession. I acted in a way that was not defensive towards their decision, instead I empathised and outlined the purpose of social work without patronising the student. Secondly, social justice is also valued in the BASW Code of Ethics (2014). This explains my actions of why I empathised with the service user and went on to explain that her social workers should have built a positive relationship with her, challenging the poor practice that occurred. Furthermore, I maintained my professional integrity by creating an honest and open environment where the service user could express their thoughts and opinions. I also introduced myself in a manner where I explained my role as a social work student, continuing then to explain the role of social work practitioners and how they should behave, without manipulating her previous experiences.

Considering my own learning, I believe this incident has broadened my perspective on the social work profession as it highlights that poor practice can occur, which ultimately motivates me to become the best practitioner that I can be to further help service users. It has allowed me to examine an outside perspective towards social workers and emphasises the importance of rekindling that poor association and replacing it with positive relationships instead. I learnt that this is beneficial because building positive relationships are essential in order to carry out effective practice. For example, we have a duty of care towards our clients, where we engage in their "well-being" and are "expected to work to the best of your ability" (Cooper, 2012, pp. 43). This is achieved by partaking a good relationship with the client, hence the positive consequence of the build of trust, which enables them to confide in you, where you can more appropriately help them achieve their goals and improve their well-being. Furthermore, the incident forced me to learn about my own skills, as it proved to me that I could personally create an inviting environment. This was evident as the child felt comfortable enough to share their beliefs, encouraging a trusting relationship. Moreover, regarding my actions and responses to the incident, I learnt how to actively show empathy when communicating with a service user. For example, I expressed this by the language I used when conveying my empathetic thoughts to the explanation of the unfortunate experiences she endured.

In regard to how I would act and things I would do differently in the future, I would try to ensure to have this sensitive type of conversation in a more private setting, to allow further discussions and questions without becoming interrupted. This would allow time for the service user to explain their opinions in more detail about their experiences with their social workers, in order to highlight poor practice and help me to understand why they have formed that opinion. Consequently, this would also allow the service user to inform my practice positively, by further helping me to understand what went wrong with her relationships built, and what to avoid in my future practice when trying to build positive relationships with other clients. Significantly, by the service user being able to explain their personal opinions in a private setting, I believe it would also benefit them. For example, it will allow significant time for them to express themselves further, which may help them to arise from their poor experiences, empowering them, by knowing that I would listen and take on their advice willingly.

In conclusion, this incident highlights the negative impacts that can occur when a lack of trust and reliability becomes evident within a professional relationship. Communicational skills were most important throughout the interaction because they set the foundations for the building of a positive relationship. Lifespan and attachment theories are key for helping to understand the

feelings and actions of adolescents. Multi-agency and working positively with other professionals are paramount for the continuity of effective practice because it allows for accurate interpretations of service users, and information shared helps to explain the background of service users more thoroughly and considerately. Reflection and supervision have proved to be useful when developing professional competence as it allows for the development of practice because it helps to highlight what went well and what needs to be changed for further effectiveness.

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