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Middleton, Tristan ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8111-3856 (2018) Working with Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs in a Nurture Group setting: The professional and personal impact. In: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE): Advancing Theory, Policy and Practice International Conference, 22nd to 23rd November 2018, Nottingham Trent University. (Unpublished)

EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/7036

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Tristan Middleton
School of Education
tmiddleton1@glos.ac.uk

Working with Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs in a Nurture Group setting: The professional and personal impact.

UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE
at Cheltenham and Gloucester

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
Advancing Theory, Policy and Practice
International Conference
Thurs 22nd – Fri 23rd November 2018

Structure

- Why I carried out the research
- Nurture Groups
- The theoretical framework
- Methodological information
- Emergent research questions
- Findings
- Implications for practice
- Next steps

Why do the research?

- To understand the constructed meaning within the professional and personal lives of primary school Teaching Assistant practitioners in response to 'critical events' (Webster & Mertova, 2007) during their work in a Nurture Group (Bennathan & Boxall, 2003)
- My previous professional experience.

Nurture Groups (Bennathan & Boxall, 2003)

An evidence-based (Sloan *et al*. 2016), in-school approach to cater for the needs of children who have experienced ACEs, linked to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1965) and psycho-social learning.

See www.nurtureuk.org

Theoretical framework

the narrative construction of reality (Bruner, 1991)

The researcher's role is not that of a neutral listener and, as such, the identity and role of the researcher becomes an important and integral part of the research process (Hollway & Jefferson, 2001).

If you don't acknowledge your influence, it is like holding a candle to the sun.
(Tempest, 2016 after William Blake)

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The research arrangements

- Data collected with two Teaching Assistants working as Nurture Group practitioners, within a single Primary School

- Data gathering over one academic year.

The research arrangements - supervision

- providing a compassionate (Carroll, 2007) and sympathetically aligned researcher, who personally and professionally validates and supports the practitioners,
- providing a safe, non-judgemental space (Reid & Soan, 2018) to explore and express distress related to their work experiences (Hawkins and Shohet, 2006).

The research arrangements - supervision

- This has an empowering nature (Chappell, 1999) and can be used to develop the practitioners' reflective thinking (Bluckert, 2006)

Methodology

Three Data Collection sections consisting of three phases each, with additional supervision sessions.

Phase A: 45min Supervision Session

Phase B: Transcription shared with practitioners

Phase C: 45min Research Session

Emergent Research Questions

How does the researcher's 'own story of experience' (Clandinin, 2013 p.82) and the 'connection between the participants' (Alleyne, 2015 p.40) impact on the practitioners' implicit beliefs and subsequent actions?

What do the practitioners see as key factors in managing their own ability to support learners who have experienced ACEs?

Findings

3 key elements which illustrate the challenges of working with vulnerable learners linked to the practitioners' professional and personal lives:

- **Motivation**
- **Physiological impact**
- **Entering into personal life and relationships**

Data findings

Motivation

"…. A couple of hours just sat and thought about it …..that was me trying to….gee myself up to get in, a come on, come on, we can do this…" (Kerry)

"I think it did affect my practice because I felt like I wasn't giving all the children 100% what they needed " (Lilly)

"So just personally I was sort of saying I don't want to go to work. For the first time in my life, I do not want to go." (Lilly)

In the context of the practitioner who, in the previous academic year, had been working alone with a 'challenging child' and walked the child back to another practitioner having broken her leg.

Data findings

Physiological impact: simile

"I started to feel alright about him not being here and now it feels like the band aid has just been ripped off and I've started hurting all over again" (Kerry)

"When he left it felt like losing an arm" (Kerry)

Physiological impact: actual

"Even though I was on my knees, I had nothing else to give at the end of the year and I was physically crying, it was my best year" (Lilly)

Data findings

Entering into personal life and relationships

"I mean, I've even dreamt of it before …. I was worried about him the whole time thinking, oh my God, what's happening to him at home and what's he doing, is he okay, …. and yes, even dreamt about being in this room." (Kerry)

"Quite often I'll say to my husband, 'what have you been doing today?' and he'll start telling me and I kind of glaze over and then I barrage him with everything." (Lilly)

Data findings

Entering into personal life and relationships

"one of my friends said to me 'God, is that all you do?' I said 'What do you mean?' She said 'All you've done is talk about work.' 'What?' She said 'That's all you do, isn't it? " (Kerry)

"I said to my son...it's quite funny, most mornings sort of last term it was quite stressful, I was, 'come on, hurry up, go…' ….but actually I feel quite relaxed. We sort of talk to each other in the mornings and we have a bit of a giggle on the way to school now rather than me shouting at him and bellowing" (Lilly)

"It just makes you negative about all aspects, at home and at school…" (Lilly)

3 Emergent findings

1. Critical incidents:
    a. Child related
    b. Management related
2. Evidence of sessions empowering the practitioners (Chappell, 1999)
3. Some key factors which impact on the practitioners' resilience to continue to support the children

Emergent findings

1.Critical incidents:

a. Child related

Challenging behaviour was challenging because;

- It evidenced very difficult emotional states for the individual children
- Because it challenged the practitioners' sense of making a positive impact

"I feel like that's where we're really coming short with it, whereas we can do the Nurture…. " (Kerry)

- Because it raised questions about their practice with the school leadership and other staff

"'He wasn't like that until he started coming to you for full-time nurture'." (Kerry)

Emergent findings

1. Critical incidents:
    b. Management related

Management issues were challenging because;

- Practitioners can feel listened to but not heard

"'nodding dog syndrome', everything will be 'Yes I agree …..that's what we need to do next.' But it won't get followed through" (Kerry)

- Management demands conflict with the ethos which they have committed to

"Do you want me to build his resilience so he can sit in that classroom unsupported or do you just want me to contain him?"(Kerry)

Emergent findings

2. Evidence of sessions empowering the practitioners (Chappell 1999)

"'And I feel happy and I just feel being able to talk and being able… I felt more confident after our chat actually and after reading through some things I said I thought, yes, I am going to say that, in a constructive way." (Lilly)

"""It was almost like I spoke to you about it and then I gave myself a good talking to and I thought, no, don't go along with things." " (Lilly)

Was this as a result of the practitioners feeling deeply heard ?

(Rogers 1967)

Emergent findings

3. Some key factors which impact on the practitioners' resilience to continue to support the children

a. Values / commitment to 'nurture'

b. Colleague friendship

c. Leadership

"And, actually, feeling undervalued for what you're doing. You know, the occasional 'Yeah, you've done a great job and we really appreciate it' – that doesn't cut it. " (Kerry)

"I think the biggest thing I don't feel supported with is the fact that our head of school ….we worked together so closely and we had a really good relationship….. Now she's got that thing where you just know she's not really listening…. that really just makes you feel undervalued " (Lilly)

Implications for practice-

In order to address the needs of practitioners supporting children & young people who have experienced ACEs ……

- Interpersonal relationships between practitioners need to be considered
- A leadership approach which is based upon listening and honesty needs to be considered

This links closely to current literature about practitioner resilience (Peixoto *et al*. 2018)

Implications for practice-

In order to address the needs of practitioners supporting children & young people who have experienced ACEs ……

- A motivation based upon values – a vocation (Huebner, 1996 in Schwarz, 1999, Buijs, 2005, Flores, 2018) – may be desirable
- Providing a forum for practitioners working with vulnerable children & young people in which to be ‘heard’ needs to be considered

Implications for practice-

In order to address the needs of practitioners supporting children & young people who have experienced ACEs ……

Who supports them to process the emotional aspects of the work?

Who ensures appropriate debriefing for them?

Who helps them to develop as reflective practitioners?

Next steps

Research with Dr Tina Rae & Dr Jody Walshe:

Creating a "Nurturing Peer Supervision" (Rae, Middleton & Walshe 2018) framework and training programme

Researching impact of a year long cycle of NPS

- **Recruiting 2 groups of 6 NG practitioners**
- **Recruiting an Educational Psychologist as NPS Lead for each group**

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