**From the Mouths of Mothers: Can drama facilitate reflective learning for social workers?**

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Abstract

This article explores and evaluates a cross-disciplinary small scale project using applied theatre in social work education. The aim was to provide an ‘Affective Encounter’ where students could practice empathic engagement, understanding of the needs of children who have been sexually abused and their protective parents/carers and engage in the complexities of working with family members who may be resistant. The workshop took place five times over a period of three years and was attended by children and families social workers on a one year post-qualifying graduate diploma course. While the use of verbatim theatre does not offer a guarantee of factual truth, it provided the students with some performed moments of personal testimony which was taken word-for-word from mothers whose children had been sexually abused. This allowed the social workers to hear the marginalized narratives of the protective mothers and to practice without a negative impact on the service user. The evaluation identified from self-report the development of emotional and practical skills and knowledge of available resources. This paper focuses on the emotional skills reported and two emerging themes are discussed: learning for humane practice, and the use of this pedagogical approach to encourage affective reflection.

**Introduction**

*‘Relaxed and intense at the same time - we were talking about difficult issues in a very participative and active way, not just a lecture.’*

This article explores and evaluates a cross-disciplinary small-scale project using applied theatre in social work education between 2012-2014. Applied theatre is a form of theatrical engagement working in non-traditional, theatre-based settings. Applied theatre practice is found in many contexts from educational and pedagogic work, health care and education, to prison and advocacy work. It typically works with communities in diverse locations and makes theatre with, by and for communities. These applied theatre workshops drew on verbatim interview material, gathered by Stuart Fisher several years earlier when she created a verbatim theatre play ‘From The Mouths of Mothers’(2013). In verbatim theatre, subjects are interviewed and then their testimony is edited and reproduced word-for–word as a script that is then performed as a play. The material Stuart Fisher drew on in her play was gathered from a series of seven interviews with service users from a charity based in London which provides support resources for non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children. The play tells the story of the mothers’ experiences of their child’s disclosure of sexual abuse and in many cases their battle to get appropriate support from a range of professionals including social workers. Because the conviction rate in cases of child sexual abuse remains extremely low, many of the mothers in the play also struggled to protect their child from further abuse by the perpetrator.

**Background – The context of practice**

During the first decade of the twenty-first century in England there were increasing concerns expressed about the bureaucratisation of social work practice, particularly in relation to child care social work. An unintended consequence of the child death inquiries, particularly Lord Laming’s report into the death of Victoria Climbie, was to increase organisational processes and procedures, which occurred alongside a command and control managerialist culture across public sector services under New Labour. In her review of child protection Munro (2011, p. 84) proposed a more joined up and relationship based approach to child protection which ‘[reduces] bureaucracy in social work and [increases] the space for professional judgement’. The report warns against an increasingly ‘rational-technical approach’ to social work where good practice is expected to be acquired through ‘procedural manuals’ (Munro, 2011, p. 87).

Integral to the promotion of relationship-based practice is the need for attention to reflective practice, critical reflection and the impact of emotions and power relationships in work with children and families. There is clearly a need to focus on the affective domain in order to address the criticism of social work that it has become over bureaucratic rather than focusing on the needs of the service user. In pedagogical terms this reflects the analysis of Schon (1991) who identifies the process of tacit knowing or intuition that a professional brings to complex situations and what he calls artistry in ‘the swampy lowlands of practice’.

Relationship building with families in distress requires both rationality and an adherence to procedure, but also feeling orientated engagements or ‘emotion work’, as social workers tread a path between ‘care’ and ‘control’ (Turney, 2012). Building trusting and effective working relationships are particularly critical in cases of child sexual abuse where disclosures take a long time to emerge and require a sensitive approach by social workers and the non-abusing parents and carers (Allnock and Miller, 2013). However in the light of the threat of child deaths and continuing blame culture, this kind of subjective, emotional engagement also feels highly precarious and ‘risky’, heightened by the way such cases are reported by politicians and within the media (Jones, 2014).

Child sexual abuse continues to occupy a somewhat ‘taboo’ status within our society and is therefore difficult to talk about or hear about. It is a subject that is perhaps easier to process when it is, to some degree, ‘othered’, perceived to be existing ‘elsewhere’, in another community ‘out there’ in a family which is not ours, a community which is distant or radically different to our own lives. In the early 1990s, following the Cleveland Inquiry, child sexual abuse received considerable attention from policy makers and practitioners, however over the following fifteen years in the child protection discourse and practice arena attention diminished and neglect and emotional abuse became the focus (Radford, 2011, p.107). With revelations about Jimmy Saville and other high profile people accused (and some convicted) of child sexual abuse, a spotlight has been shone on this issue once again, but it remains being part of ‘another’ era, e.g. ‘historic enquiries’. However child sexual abuse remains part of the lives of many children both within and outside of their family. The sexual exploitation of children by perpetrators outside of their families has received much welcome and recent attention, including through high profile cases in Rotherham and Oxfordshire. Denial and ‘othering’ processes are vividly described in the reports on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham (Jay, 2014). This paper focuses on intra-family child sexual abuse, which has received limited attention in the past few years.

Studies on child sexual abuse suggest an important way of helping children who have been sexually abused is through a supportive relationship with a non-abusing parent or carer (NCH Children and Families Project 2001); however support for the protective parent can often be insufficient. Drawing attention to how the very language adopted by social workers conspires to misrecognise and overlook the needs of families in the aftermath of disclosure, Hooper and Humphreys (1997, p. 300) argue that the term ‘non-abusing parent’ itself is at fault and ‘defines mothers and fathers only in relation to their involvement or otherwise in perpetrating the sexual abuse of their children [and] therefore conceals the possible significance of their relationships with their children both in the meaning and impact of that abuse and in their children's recovery’. More recently the report into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham (Jay 2014) describes how children and their parents’ voices were not heard, and on occasions having been treated with contempt.

Supporting families affected by child sexual abuse involves working with individuals who are very traumatised and distressed, having strong emotional impacts on social workers trying to establish support and interventions in often difficult organisational contexts (Martin et al., 2014). Recognition of the impact of emotional defences that protect the worker from an awareness of thoughts, feelings, memories or actions that produces anxiety is essential to reflect upon in practice and educational settings (Ruch & Murray, 2011). Neuman et al (2010, p41) argue that social work has for along time recognised the need to provide learning in each of the three domains, the cognitive (knowledge and information), the behavioural (skills) and the affective. The affective domain is often the most challenging area to teach and assess. It is ‘rooted in the emotional life of the student and reflects the student’s beliefs, attitudes, impressions, desires, feelings, values, preferences and interests.’ Bogo et al (2013, p.260) in her research combines these domains using simulated assessments but delineates between ‘procedural competence’, when a social worker is able to perform and use procedures and meta-competence which refers to ‘higher order, overarching qualities and abilities of a conceptual, interpersonal and personal/professional nature. This includes students’ cognitive, critical and self reflective capacities.’ Whilst the project we discuss in this paper sought to provide learning along the three domains, a key aim was to provide an ‘Affective Encounter’ where students could practice empathic engagement and engage with the complexities of working with families affected by child sexual abuse.

**The Drama Workshops**

Service user and carer involvement is an important part of social work education and recognised as a source of knowledge in developing evidence based practice (Pawson et al., 2003). A range of initiatives have been developed to involve service users in teaching students. These have been well documented and include parents living in poverty (Gupta & Blewitt, 2008), young people with experience of being looked after (Leonard et al, 2015), and carers and parents of disabled children and adopters and adopted children. However the voices of service users in marginalised groups, including the experience of children who have been sexually abused and their protective parent are often absent (Wallcraft et al., 2012). The current research evidence on the impact of service user involvement on learners and on social work practice in the UK is limited (Robinson & Webber, 2013). Robinson and Webber adapted Kirkpatrick’s four level evaluation framework to identify levels of impact. They found evidence from the research studies reviewed that both students’ and service users’ perceptions were modified but further evidence was required of higher level behavioural changes by students, resulting changes to organisations and the benefits to service users.

This project was developed in the belief that teaching and learning initiatives developed through interdisciplinary collaboration between social work and the arts can communicate service users’ and carers’ experiences in a meaningful way. Like Green and Wilks (2008, p.194) we wanted to move ‘beyond the personal testimony model, yet retain some of the visceral impact that characterises such approaches’. The purpose of the workshops was to use drama and applied theatre strategies to:

* Explore an empathic engagement/ understanding with the protective and non abusing parent or carer of a child who has been sexually abused
* Learn about the support needs of non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children
* Create a safe space where social workers can ‘practice’ interventions and difficult decision making processes.

The authors delivered the five workshops in a studio at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD). All the sessions were supported by volunteers from RCSSD studying applied theatre. The first two sessions in 2012 were half days. Subsequent sessions were delivered in 2013 and 2014 over a full day in order to provide more time to integrate the experience with practice. A total of 87 students, participated with numbers attending each session varying between 13 and 23. All were qualified social workers ranging from 2 – 17years post qualification experience. They worked predominantly in local authority children’s services, with a minority of workers in youth offending, the voluntary sector and independent fostering agencies.

**Methodology**

The University Ethics Committee reviewed and granted permission for the evaluation to take place. Evaluation of a social work education episode of learning is inevitably set within a political context given the government and media attention to the social work role. Likewise the criticisms of the technical –rational approach to social work practice with service users has challenged the focus on policy and procedures to develop a culture that allows for humane relationship based practice. The Pawson and Tilley (1997, p.55) conceptual model of ‘realistic evaluation’ focuses on a realist tradition ‘which avoids the traditional epistemological poles of positivism and relativism’. They emphasise the ‘need to penetrate beneath the surface of observable inputs and outputs of a program’ so providing ‘ontological depth’ to the evaluation (Pawson and Tilley p.216). This offers an opportunity to consider the impact of the learning from the sessions while recognising the importance of the ‘real world’ process on the proposed change. The model allows a focus on the often changing context, including political dimensions, and underlying factors that support outcomes. For example the provision of the service user testimonies through drama and an environment to explore and practice interventions away from the workplace provided an opportunity for students to learn about their practice.

The evaluation consisted of a questionnaire completed immediately before and after the session by each student. As Carpenter (2010) notes there is a need to develop evaluation methods in social work to establish what works best and how and Pawson and Tilley (1997) discuss the need for cumulative evaluations to inform policy and practice, even in changing contexts. The strength of this evaluation is in the longitudinal and cross disciplinary nature of the design. It has taken place with five groups over three years and the same questions have been asked to each group. Saldaña (2014, p.96) emphasises the importance of ‘thinking multi-disciplinarily’ as it offers opportunities to design and deliver an evaluation that reflects an integration of thinking, representing different perspectives and thinking beyond subject specific boundaries that can be limiting. However the limitations of this methodology are that this only provides immediate self-reported data on the experience. It does not inform us if this intervention provides different outcomes compared to another educational intervention on the same topic or with a comparative group that had not received the intervention. We can however draw some conclusions on the impact of this educational intervention and the identified learning for practice. According to the Robinson and Webber (2013) adaptation of Kirkpatrick’s four level model this evaluation explores level two changes, that of attitudes and perceptions towards service users

The structured questionnaires were utilised with the aim of exploring the ‘affective encounter’. The initial questionnaire focussed on factual information about student background, role and experience with open questions concerning their confidence and feelings about working with children and families where there was possible sexual abuse. For example ‘When you are about to engage with a child who has disclosed sexual abuse, what kinds of thoughts and feelings are likely to be running around in your head? When you initially interview a parent and/or carer of a sexually abused child who has not been implicated in the initial disclosure made by the child, what are your expectations of that person? The post session open questions focussed on the learning experience and impact of the pedagogical approaches used and the learning for practice. For example “How would describe your emotional state and feelings during the activity?” ‘Thinking now about your impressions and expectations of a non-abusing parent or carer of a sexually abused child, could you write down five words that might describe this person?’

In line with Pawson and Tilley (1997) the authors recognise their insider role as designers, teachers and implementers of this interdisciplinary learning experience. A reflexive approach to analysing the data was required to address possible bias and preconceptions. A research assistant summarised the written evaluations for each cohort, recording anonymously the demographic data from each student and keeping the qualitative feedback intact. A thematic narrative analysis was applied (Reissman, 2008) to the data; the intention being to keep intact individual accounts of the experience while recognising the situated social and political nature of social work practice and education. Cross-checking of the emerging themes was undertaken by the authors. Additionally a word cloud analysis was undertaken for questions asking for a description of feelings and emotional state during the activity. Word clouds, where frequency of word or content is illustrated through size of text, are beginning to be recognised as a useful visual tool in education and research and can provide ‘an interesting and innovative way of analysing text and revealing obscured discourses’ (Gill & Griffin, 2010, p.316). It can contribute to avoiding bias in qualitative analysis although context and interpretation are important factors (Cidell, 2010).

**Findings and Discussion**

Participants’ feedback in relation to what they learnt could be divided into three broad areas: emotional skills, practical communication skills, and information about sexual abuse and resources available to support families. We discuss the emerging themes relating to the first of these areas, namely exploring the ‘Affective Encounter’ as this appeared to the authors, the most salient in relation to learning for practice and developing pedagogical approaches in social work education.

**Learning for Practice - Becoming Human**

Rosemary’s story is of a mother whose four year old child had disclosed sexual abuse and is taken word-for-word from an interview with one of the mothers who was interviewed by Stuart Fisher for the verbatim theatre project. The first performative encounter with Rosemary is her making a very angry phone call to Children’s Services, explaining that her daughter had disclosed sexual abuse and demanding she be medically examined. This scene was based on the ‘real’ story and the ‘real’ Rosemary fought for a year before a paediatrician finally called a case conference for her daughter. After a discussion about this scene, two extracts of Rosemary’s verbatim testimony taken from the play were performed. The text is emotive and movingly tells the story of Rosemary’s daughter’s disclosures.

The comment ‘surprisingly affective’ had a resonance for us and we were also quite ‘surprised’ at a perceptible shift that occurred in the room and amongst the participants, both during and following this moment of performance. It is hard to recount exactly what this ‘shift’ felt like or was, but a change of atmosphere suddenly emerged. It was as if Rosemary changed from being objectified as the ‘difficult service user’ to a whole person with real emotions. The narrative was her ‘truth’ and workers were forced to engage with this in a way different from having a service user present to tell their story. It was made real through theatre, but at the same time freed workers from having to deal with the raw emotions of a person in the present.

Students described the moment when Rosemary and other mothers learn fully about the abuse as:

*‘to remember the overwhelming feelings and earth shattering impact about learning about the abuse.’*

*‘the paradigm shift of taking on different characters.’*

The findings indicate that there were some elements of change during the sessions. At the beginning of the session students identified that their expectations of a non-abusing carer/parent were that the parents would ‘demonstrate to them (the social worker) their ability to support the child’ and be ‘supportive’ of the investigation’. A majority of students identified a focus on assessing the parents and their responses to the child with a wish for them ‘to believe the child and put them first’. There was also an expectation of honesty and some recognition there may be emotional elements of denial, shock and anger:

*‘To be shocked but eventually respond by doing all they can to protect/ support.’*

Students were asked at the end of the days to consider their impressions and expectations of a non-abusing parent. The emotions a parent/carer may go through when subjected to a traumatic event were evidenced and highlighted in the testimony of Rosemary.The majority of responses recognised the impact of a wide range of emotions. These included anger, confusion, potential feelings of helplessness and anxiety, guilt, upset, fright, betrayal and frustration. Students also recognised positive qualities of caring, empathy, insightful and protective capacities of the adult.

This is not to say that the procedures for dealing with child sexual abuse are not important, indeed they are crucial. But by witnessing Rosemary’s testimony, we would argue that the possibility for a relational and empathic engagement with Rosemary and her child emerged. Consequently perhaps, the social workers were able to glimpse beyond the protocols that ensure a child’s physical safety and begin to reflect on how best to care and support for both the mother and child who are living through this traumatic situation:

*‘How difficult it is to juggle protocols and people - how can you help people as best possible but still stick to procedures’*

In relation to approaching future social work with a child and their family differently, the majority of students acknowledged the session had impacted on their approach through raising their awareness and provided reflections on changes they would make:

 *‘Will not underestimate the impact this is having not only on the child but also the family/non-abusing parent.*

*‘to think more about the persecutory nature in which we question or work with non-abusing parents’*

Rather than using drama to introduce a problem that required a solution, the enactment of Rosemary’s testimony brought about an encounter with Rosemary as ‘a person’ and demanded an acknowledgment of the unknowability of otherness that marks out the self-other relationship. Implicit in the performance of testimony was a direct appeal to be listened to and to have this truth, this experience, recognised. This transitioned the social workers from the familiarity of problem-solving requiring them instead to become witnesses of Rosemary’s story. Arguably, at this point Rosemary ceased to become simply a non-abusing parent and instead became present in the workshop to be ‘met as a person’. An example of what Beckett & Maynard (2005) describe as one of the most basic functions of ethical social work, which is to create the subject by finding the human being behind the objectifying label. The majority of students broadened their primary focus towards non-abusing parents from seeing them as primarily in relation to their instrumental role in relation to the protection of the child, to being recognized as individual human beings in their own right. Much research has highlighted the centrality of understanding the meaning of responses of parents in child protection investigations and seeing this as a dynamic between the worker and the parent (Turney, 2012,), yet many parents describe feeling stigmatized and dehumanised (Gupta, 2015) Fine and Mandell (2014) concluded that the more respectfully a worker used power, the more likely the families were to feel heard and work with professionals. The need for humaneness and recognition goes to the core of the relationship between social work and social justice (Rossiter, 2014).

**Developing Pedagogical Approaches in Social Work Education.**

**Affective Reflection**

The Munro review of child protection (2011), referred to earlier, called for a culture of learning to enhance professional judgement. One aspect of this is the instinctive, intuitive ‘gut feeling’ a social worker may have. These feelings, Munro argues, need to be recognised, critically reflected upon and analysed as part of the decision making process. A lack of awareness in this affective domain can contribute to error and bias during the complexities of assessment and decision making with children and their families.

Students were asked about initial thoughts and feelings if they were about to engage in real life with a child who had disclosed sexual abuse. A range of answers were given that reflected their expectations of an intense, highly emotionally charged scenario with expectations of them to perform well within a complex social work situation. This included forming a relationship with the child, building trust, engaging and keeping them informed, assessing risk and protective factors now and over time, making plans and being supportive of the parent/carer, working well with other agencies, and not causing problems for the criminal investigation. It seems just the thought of this encounter engendered gut reactions and feelings of strong emotions. The highest recorded feeling from group members was anxiety. For example:

*‘I really don’t want this case as I know I will get really emotional and anxious regards to the child’.*

*‘Anxious about not responding in the most appropriate way’.*

In order to encourage the students to draw on and consider their instinctive or gut feelings we set up situations, such as the difficult father, a possible sexual abuser of his daughter, who wanted to discuss becoming a social worker himself. Here the students could experiment but more crucially, draw on their experience and their instinctive response to intervene. This moment of being witnessed performing ‘successfully’ can, we believe, have an effect on the social worker, in the sense that they were ‘touched’ by what they observed and their confidence in their knowledge and expertise was ‘reinforced’ through the experience of being witnessed performing so successfully. They enjoyed:

*‘enacting, practicing interventions’…*

*‘as a method of learning in the environment of less pressure’.*

But also demonstrated a reflective capacity to explore the meaning for themselves and attention to their own feelings:

*‘in reflecting on my own emotional responses”*

*‘Will look to consider my feelings more in the process’*

Affective reflection does need to have purpose and to develop informed practice. The word cloud in Figure 1 provides a visual interpretation of key words to describe the specific feelings associated with this activity. Perhaps crucially was the impact of having both the emotions generated in hearing the testimony and being able to reflect in action (the action of doing, performing, role-playing). It is interesting to consider further how the affect of the affective responses to the actual activity (see figure 2) and the feelings which come from it (through being witnessed and through observing) can strengthen the social workers understanding and knowledge of the situation, in a sense potentially assisting the social worker to make that move away from procedure led processes to achieve the level of Bogo’s meta-competence (2013). This is a more holistic approach that is grounded in critical reflection (Fook, 2007: Schon 1991).

These dimensions are reflected in the students’ comments:

*‘At times vulnerable, emotionally drawn into the scenes.’*

*‘Surprisingly affected and relieved about that….not the ‘emotional black hole’ I sometimes worry I’m becoming’.*

The argument here is that the emotional responses to the performed testimony together with the metacognition/affective reflection that occurs in the doing (the students’ theatrical engagement and being witnessed performing successfully) can strengthen the social workers’ instinctive responses, and therefore their knowledge. It provides an opportunity not only to celebrate and affirm their professional judgment and practice but to consider different perspectives and explore assumptions about the scenarios through the engagement with peers, lecturers and the theatre practitioners, e.g a growing recognition of the complexity of emotions evoked in the non-abusing parent when discovering and reporting the sexual abuse.

Anderson discusses affective atmospheres: he suggests that they are “a class of experiences that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity across human and nonhuman materialities and in between subject/object distinctions”(2009, p.78). In social work the use of case discussion groups can be a place to build relationship-based reflection and provide a place and climate where the worker can be curious, vulnerable and uncertain about their practice (Ruch, 2007). Through the use of applied drama the elements of acting and playfulness and working across disciplines also encourage a climate of risk taking and similar points are identified by the students:

*‘I liked the drama students and being able to acknowledge my own vulnerability as a social worker’*

*‘Intense feelings perpetuated by the discussion, contained environment (for the anxiety)’.*

*‘in the environment of less pressure, it feels like learn through play!’*

The facilitation skills required include role modeling by the interdisciplinary team to encourage students to think, feel, reflect and talk about the ‘affective encounter’ with service user testimonies. Students commented positively on the facilitation of the groups, for example:

*‘made to feel it was OK to share difficult thoughts and feelings’*

 *‘asked thought provoking questions’*

**Service Users Testimonies and Verbatim Theatre**

While verbatim theatre has recently encountered something of a resurgence within theatres in the UK and beyond (Forsyth and Megson 2011, Martin 2013) it has also received criticism for its (mis)appropriation of the voices of the ‘voiceless’ (Heddon 2008: 129) which some critics argue are used only to validate this form of theatre’s claims of truth and authenticity. However, Stuart Fisher (2011) argues that in some contexts enactment can ‘facilitate a moment of recognition and a positive process of empathic identification which, if handled carefully, can be beneficial or even therapeutic for the verbatim subjects’. Thompson offers the idea that positive experiences can ‘linger’ in the ‘the bodies that witness and participate’ in performance-based events (2005, p.235, p.74). Similarly Hamera argues ‘muscles have memory, as do minds and hearts,’ implying that the physical body is able to recall and remember certain affects (2007, p.208). Accordingly, we suggest that there is an affective capacity in using the creative arts for reflection on practice, as it provides a space for the witnessing, the seeing of your own practice and thus being able to recognize yourself and your feelings in that moment. In particular we can take these moments of instinctive response (i.e. through role play – bodily experiences) and recreate these experiences in a more formal/work scenario, thereby deepening the critical learning.

All of the students who completed this question in the evaluation advocated this type of learning for other social workers. They found the testimonies of Rosemary and Sara very powerful, some experienced a range of visceral feelings that were unsettling and at times uncomfortable:

*‘my chest tightened during the telephone call scene – the actors were too believable and drew me in…’*

*‘very light hearted at the start but the verbatim monologue very much changed the atmosphere’.*

Irvine et al (2014, p.7) researched student experiences of service user involvement and found that post qualified social work students valued the service user voice as it was grounded ‘in the reality of practice’. Even when qualified for five years students ‘remembered the emotional impact of hearing from service users and carers’, were able to remember the stories and believed this experience impacted on their practice. Anderson (2009) suggests that affect occurs or can be found in the articulation of relations or relational processes (i.e. finding links between topics). For example the social workers finding the links between Rosemary’s experiences and their own experiences as social workers dealing with child sexual abuse.

*‘Listening to mother’s stories was sad to hear and felt strongly that I would want to do things differently.’*

The story of Rosemary not only provided an example of delay in responding longer term but also provided a negative testimony of the immediate response from social workers where all possible empathic responses were replaced with a dogmatic approach to recording the address and telephone number. Post qualifying education is about critical self-reflection, however at times, the authors have found when service users describe their difficult experiences with social workers the students can become defensive, or react with a patronizing and rescuing approach. The inability to engage with the service user as educator and leader in a reverse power dynamic to the usual practice relationship can lead to a missed opportunity for new learning for practice (Leonard et al. 2015). Often on reflection students tell us it is because they already know the issues and find the negative feedback difficult to listen to. It can be challenging to their sense of self, causing some dissonance (Gupta and Blewett, 2008). Farrow and Fillingham (2012) report similar experiences of a lack of engagement of some managers on a post qualifying management course. Overall this encounter allowed for the difficult story to be told and listened to without students distancing or objectifying of the mothers:

*‘I learnt from the real experience of women who met with Amanda.”*

*‘Hearing real examples with the human elements of the scenarios being acted”*

*‘comforted by the fact that they were actors and not real victims’*

In addition there were opportunities to ask the actor in role questions as she had agreed consent for information she could share about the mothers and their children. This avoided some of the difficulties described by Irvine (2014) where students felt they had to be careful what questions they asked in order to be sensitive to the service users experience. As a result the affective and visceral experience was retained through the reality of the acted testimonies in a way not provided through other teaching methods such as case studies.

 **Conclusion**

This project provided an unusual interdisciplinary collaboration between social work and applied theatre educators and students, and the real testimonies of service users. This provided an opportunity to explore the affective domain of social work practice in a learning climate where working with family members could be reflected upon in a contained safe environment, allowing the practitioner to share feelings of curiosity, uncertainty, vulnerability, and anxiety. However this form of teaching can be challenging. It requires confidence in how it is introduced to students and an ability to work with the emotions and values of students in a fluid and responsive way. This involves role modelling uncertainty and exploration of feelings and gut responses, as well as a commitment to interdisciplinary planning and working. All of which takes more time than a lecture on sexual abuse.

This small-scale evaluation based on self-reporting before and after the learning event contributes to a developing body of knowledge on the impact of using the arts to assist social work practice. However there is a need for further development of research measures that capture impact at higher levels changes of organisational change and the benefits to service users as identified by Robinson and Webber (2013). The evaluation over three years provides evidence of students learning emotional skills for practice, to listen to the self and recognise visceral and instinctive responses that can contribute to developing capacity for 'affective reflection'. This addressed a need in the post qualifying curriculum for attention to the impact of child sexual abuse but in a form that attended to the human being behind the objectifying label and recognition that purely technical procedural responses can be detrimental to supporting the protective mother and child. We would advocate this type of learning can provide another way to access the affective domain in developing emotional skills for social work practice and would encourage others to form cross disciplinary alliances with university applied drama departments where there is rich learning for both academics and students.

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Figure 1 Feelings associated with the activity undertaken

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Figure 2 Response to the actual activity

