“When he left it felt like losing an arm”: Constructed meaning through personal narratives in response to professional experiences.

This research seeks to understand the constructed meaning within the professional and personal lives of UK primary school Teaching Assistant practitioners in response to critical events during their work in a Nurture Group, using a collaborative, transformative narrative inquiry approach.

Nurture Group provision is targeted to address the needs of children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties. As such, critical events may often be related to physically and emotionally challenging behaviours. The data was collected from two Teaching Assistant practitioners in two phases:

Phase 1 consisted of a clinical supervision approach to provide a safe, supportive space to allow practitioners to reflect on their practice. This space provided a listening and sympathetically aligned, researcher, in that the researcher’s professional experience includes Nurture Groups work. The discussion was recorded and transcribed.

Phase 2 began with the practitioners receiving the transcriptions from phase 1. Through collaborative negotiation, key critical events were identified. The practitioner was then invited to relate the narrative following on from the critical event, with prompts to explore both professional and personal realms.

The data from both phases is used to identify the meaning and impact of the critical events as constructed by the practitioners through an empowering and agential process.

The narrative inquiry approach, with its implied inclusivity, through the rejection of normative, positivist measures for data, reflects the inclusive values and approach of the six principles of nurture (Lucas, Insley and Buckland 2006), which form the foundation of Nurture Group practice. The social construction of meaning in relation to contextual significance is emphasised through the researcher’s professional experiences working in Nurture Groups and the developing relationship between the researcher and the practitioners. This shared contextual understanding, provided enhanced agency for the practitioners. The validity of the practitioners’ constructed meaning is given greater status through being deeply heard (Rogers 1967) by the researcher within a discourse of shared values and experiences.

The constructed narratives reflect the discourses lived by the practitioners in their attempts to come to terms with the macro-level of critical events and negotiate a path between the meso-level professional and personal identities within the context of work which focusses on emotional and phsycho-social support for children and young people.

The examination of the practitioners’ narratives gives the opportunity for leaders and policy makers to gain an authentic understanding of the impact of professional experiences on the subjective meanings (West 1996) of their personal lives and, as such, understand that practitioners’ need to be heard should be an integral part of their professional learning journey.

Rogers, C. R. (1967). *On Becoming a Person: a Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. London: Constable & Company

Lucas, S., Insley, K. and Buckland, G. (2006) *Nurture Group Principles & Curriculum Guidelines: Helping children achieve*. London: Nurture Group Network

West, L. (1996) *Beyond Fragments: Adults, Motivation and Higher Education A Biographical Analysis*. Exeter: Taylor Francis.

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