LOOKING BACK- LOOKING FORWARD: MESSAGES FROM EXPERIENCED SOCIAL WORKERS FOR THE RECENTLY QUALIFIED

MIRANDO AL PASADO - MIRANDO AL FUTURO: MENSAJES DE PROFESIONALES SOCIALES EXPERIMENTADOS A LOS RECIÉN CALIFICADOS

OLHAR PARA O PASSADO – OLHAR PARA O FUTURO: MENSAGENS DE PROFISSIONAIS SENIORES DA ÁREA SOCIAL PARA OS RECÉM-QUALIFICADOS

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ABSTRACT: This paper first briefly scopes what is known about social workers who make a long-term commitment to working within child and family services. It then reports on the response of 32 long-serving social workers from 9 countries to an open-questions survey about the messages they would want to pass on to beginning social workers. The thematic analysis seeks to tease out the motivations, rewards and strategies that are associated with those who, in different country contexts, remain committed to and find satisfaction in child and family social work. Whilst identifying similar themes to those reported in earlier publications, mostly focusing on why some social workers leave and others stay, it adds to the still comparatively limited literature reporting on career-long child and family social workers.

PALABRAS CLAVE:
Profesionales
    sociales que
    trabajan con niños
    y familias;
trabajadores seniors
    experimentados;
trabajadores recién
    graduados;
valores
    profesionales;
formación en el área
    social

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina brevemente, en primer lugar, el conocimirnto existente sobre los profesionales del ámbito social que están comprometidos al trabajo con infancia y familias a largo plazo. A continuación, informa acerca de las respuestas a un cuestionario de preguntas abiertas sobre los mensajes que transmitirían a quienes inician la profesión. El cuestionarió se ha pasado a 32 trabajadores sociales y educadores, de 9 países distintos, con una larga experiencia acreditada. El objetivo del análisis de este tema es conocer las motivaciones, recompensas y estrategias que se asocian a quienes, en diferentes países y contextos, se mantienen comprometidos con la profesión y encuentran satisfacción en el trabajo social con niños y familias. Si bien el artículo identifica temas similares a los tratados en publicaciones anteriores, que abordan las razones de la permanencia o del cambio en este ámbito profesional, en nuestro caso se agregan, además y considerando las limitaciones de las comparativas existentes, informes precisos sobre la trayectoria de los profesionales que desarrollan su labor, a lo largo de mucho tiempo, en estos ámbitos de trabajo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:
Profissionais da
    área social que
    trabalham com
    crianças e famílias;
seniores;
recém-qualificados;
valores;
formação na área
    social

RESUMO: Este artigo examina, brevemente, em primeiro lugar, o que se sabe sobre profissionais da área social que assumem um compromisso de longo prazo com o trabalho nos serviços para crianças e famílias. Em seguida, relata a resposta de 32 trabalhadores e educadores sociais seniores, de 9 países, a um questionário de perguntas abertas sobre as mensagens que eles gostariam de transmitir para aqueles que iniciam a sua profissão. A análise temática procura descobrir as motivações, recompensas e estratégias que estão associadas àqueles que, em diferentes países e contextos, se mantêm empenhados e encontram satisfação no trabalho social com crianças e famílias. Embora identifique temas semelhantes aos relatados em publicações anteriores, a maioria dos quais focados nas razões por que alguns profissionais saem e outros ficam, acrescenta à literatura, ainda comparativamente limitada, relatos sobre as carreiras dos profissionais que desenvolvem o seu trabalho, durante prazos longos, com crianças e famílias.

1. Introduction and context in published literature

The paper reports on a cross-national project on the messages that mid/end of career social workers would wish to pass on to newly-qualified colleagues. In recent years there has been a growth of interest among social work policy makers, managers and educators, and a (still small) number of research publications exploring professional identity and motivation for a career in social work. Much of the available literature focuses on turn-over and retention rather than specifically on why some remain within social work for long periods or for their whole carers. A literature-based analysis by Collins (2008) explored themes and issues that might contribute to an understanding of both turn-over and retention of social workers in statutory practice. In particular, he noted that much emphasis had been placed in earlier work on stress, and reasons for leaving, and emphasised the importance of looking at the positive experiences and characteristics of the work that resulted in social workers remaining long-term. Similarly, DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) reviewed nine studies and found that commitment to a particular area of practice, self-efficacy, supervisory and peer support as well as salary and benefits were important for retention among child welfare workers. C.M. Webb and Carpenter (2011) and S. Webb's (2015) chapter in a handbook on professional identity explore the characteristics of those who leave early or remain and focus particularly on reasons for remaining, the main focus of this paper.

Some publications (e.g. DfE, 2019 in England; Burns et al, 2019 and Child and Family Agency, 2019 in Ireland) report on routinely collected data on staff turnover and these data have been complemented by qualitative interview studies. Some publications focus on all child and family social work roles and others specifically on child protection roles. Key findings from surveys highlight the importance of 'resilience' as a characteristic that social workers commonly cite as motivating them to continue in the work. A shared conclusion is that resilience plays a role in career and personal satisfaction and it also has a positive impact on capacity to make difficult decisions.

Qualitative methodologies have also been used, involving in depth interviews with social workers seeking their views about the profession in general, or particular aspects of their work. In separate papers Cook (2020a, 2020b) interviewed 18 social workers of different service lengths after they had completed an assessment visit and subsequently in focus groups of practitioners and supervisors, seeking their 'stories' of how they weighed the risks and rewards of child protection social work. Burns (2011) and Burns et al, (2020) interviewed 35 child protection social workers and senior social workers (including differing times in post) and followed up 10 years later with an analysis of interviews with 19 of the 22 who had remained in front-line child protection work. For this follow up sample the median time in child protection work was 13 years and ages ranged from 30 to 60+. Of direct relevance to our paper, these researchers focused on

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reasons for staying in post and identified 'resilience' and 'job satisfaction theory' as potentially useful concepts for understanding why social workers remain in front-line posts. Also relevant to our paper is the cross-national qualitative study of Frost et al, (2017). Using in depth semi-structured interviews with 27 social workers and 10 social work managers in England, Italy and Sweden these researchers identified resilience and also point to organisational factors and the availability or otherwise of professional supervision as relevant to an understanding of why some workers remain in child protection social work.

Although many studies have identified the importance of supervision and supervisory support to promote retention (e.g., Griffiths et al, 2019) the value of this factor may change over time. In a multi-group sample that compared early career child welfare workers (up to 3 years' experience) with mid-career (4-10 years) and late career workers (11+years), researchers found that supervisor support and agency culture are initially the most important organizational factors related to retention but these become less important to more experienced workers (Benton et al, 2017). Also relevant to this paper is Bisman's (2004) scholarly analysis of the changes in the relative importance of knowledge, values and skills in the social work knowledge-base; and the survey by Beddoe et al, (2018) that points to the interplay between professional pride and the stigma sometimes attached to the profession through negative associations with the people served.

Studying the reflexions of individuals who have spent a large part or a whole career in the challenging work of child and family services may uncover factors that are important for career longevity. By focusing on direct practice roles and on the full range of child and family social work, it adds to our knowledge on how long-serving social workers navigate their way through careers and make sense of their contributions.

2. Aims and methods of the research

The small-scale qualitative study described in this article complements the still not substantial theoretical and research literature on the motivations, stresses, and satisfaction of long-serving child and family social workers. The overarching aim was to tap into the 'practice wisdom' that experienced social workers were continuing to pass on, in different ways, to those joining the profession. Though some had, during lengthy careers, moved in and out of direct practice into consultancy, research or training, all were still registered social workers[i] and providing a direct or at once removed service

to children and families when they agreed to complete the survey. By focusing on their knowledge and experience of direct practice roles and on the full range of child and family social work, the aim was to identify strategies and attitudes of mind that beginning social workers might find helpful when navigating their own ways through a social work career. Additionally, we aimed to consider whether some characteristics of perceived best practice or issues of key professional significance could be identified as relevant across national boundaries and employment settings.

Research Methods

This project emerged from a meeting of the International Association for Outcome-Based Evaluation and Research on Family and Children's Services (IaOBER) which agreed to take 'ownership' of the project following an initial discussion of feasibility, research quality, and ethical issues at a general meeting of the Association. The association agreed to provide logistical assistance, but no additional funding was sought.

Thirteen scholars from nine countries who had researched and/or practised in the field of child welfare each invited up to three experienced social workers, known to be highly regarded within their professional communities, to complete an anonymised on-line survey. The agreed invitation letter (with versions in English, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) explained that the recipients were being contacted as experienced social workers who currently or recently had a supervisory or educative role with early career social workers and who might be willing to make more widely available the 'practice wisdom' that had informed their careers.

Initial agreement to participate was received from 38 social workers from different countries (over 95 % of those initially contacted) following which each was provided with a unique identifier giving access to the electronic survey. The 32 who responded with usable completed schedules (accessed in one of the four languages) represent 84 % of those who originally agreed to take part. This process was managed on behalf of IaOBER by the Fondazione ZANCAN (https://www.fondazionezancan.it/fondazione), a voluntary sector research organisation based in Italy. Basic information was contributed by the authors of this paper and the wider project team on the different professional, legislative and administrative systems as context for a consideration of any similarities and differences.

A section on demographic, educational and career background was followed by three questions seeking short free-text answers.

– What are the six most important messages you have learned from your career in social work about working with children and families?
– What six pitfalls have you encountered (or managed to avoid) to which you would like to alert a newly qualified social worker?
– Do you have any points you would like to pass on to social work educators about how students and beginning social workers could best learn about the points you raise?

Participants were instructed to be succinct in their responses 'think in terms of no more than two or three sentences for each 'message'. It was also suggested that they make preliminary notes to themselves before responding.

The responses were analysed thematically using open coding procedures for qualitative content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, four of the authors from three countries (providing linguistic competence across the four survey languages) agreed on key relevant themes emerging from the literature and the responses, read over-lapping samples of the responses and identified repeated categories in each of the three questions. A preliminary report identifying these initial themes was discussed at a general meeting of IaOBER members and some adjustments made. Next, three of the authors met for two days to review a sample of the responses from each country to agree on categories and combine them across jurisdictions. The final stage was for four of the authors to read each submission in pairs, using the agreed coding frame and translating illustrative quotes into English for use in the report. (This did not follow the more usual process for checking agreement on coding between individual readers because of the complexity of understanding meanings across service contexts and languages.) Additional country-specific information and responses to queries were sought from the members of the broader steering group who had recruited participants from countries not represented in the small research team. There was considerable overlap in responses, especially amongst comments which were reframed as a negative in the 'pitfalls section' which had already been made positively in the 'important messages' section. A fuller draft (anonymized) report was discussed by all those who had contacted potential participants and the authors, prior to the writing of this paper. It was decided that because of the small numbers and the non-random method of recruiting the participants, no systematic attempt would be made to draw out comparisons by country of respondent. However direct quotes to illustrate the themes

are attributed to the respondents' country (identified by a number not allocated alphabetically to avoid any claim for country representativeness).

Ethical issues

The question of whether formal agreement of a University ethics committee was needed was discussed at the two association meeting and by Board members (all professorial level researchers with experience of ethics committee membership in their own countries) and a decision taken that no additional ethical committee agreement was needed. The reasons for this decision were firstly logistical: it was not clear which ethics committee in which of the contributing countries would be appropriate. More importantly, no identifiable information about service users was being sought. The contributors would each give informed consent by agreeing to take part following a carefully worded invitation, and their identities would only be known to the person who invited them to take part. It was also agreed during this consideration of ethics that the information gathered and the final report would not express views about the strengths or otherwise of any specific methods referred to by respondents, thus avoiding any conflict of interest for the research group. It was agreed that throughout the data collection process, the research team members were available to provide explanations about the aims, methods and future developments of the study, ensuring to all participants the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents.

3. Findings

The careers and contexts of survey participants

The 32 respondents were from nine countries although two had worked as social workers in two countries. 28 were women and 4 were men. Because of the way in which the respondents were identified, the numbers in each country differed. Four worked primarily in Australia, five in England, two in Hong Kong, four in Israel, six in Italy, two in New Zealand, five in Portugal, two in Spain and one in the USA.

Social work has been recognised as a profession requiring a University or equivalent higher education qualification in all the countries represented in the responses, but for different lengths of time. The title 'social worker' is protected and registration as a qualified social worker is obligatory in England, New Zealand and the US but the position is less clear in the other countries.

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In Italy, Portugal and Spain the work in the social sphere with children and families is shared with the profession of 'social educator' and four of the respondents held this professional qualification.

Once qualified, there are differences with respect to whether continuing professional development is available, encouraged, or mandatory. The minimum length of initial qualifying training is a three-year degree in social work or social education, or (in Australia, England and New Zealand) a degree in any subject followed by a higher degree in social work (normally a two-year master's degree). In each country included in the survey, qualified social workers are encouraged to undertake post-graduate studies (usually after a period in practice). In England following initial qualification, social workers are required to complete an assessed and supported year in employment. This is not a requirement in the countries with longer initial-qualification periods. Arrangements differ between countries with respect to whether supervision by a qualified senior social worker and post-qualifying training opportunities are routinely provided by the employing agency. Some respondents noted that some service providers had arrangements with a school of social work to provide this, but for the majority of respondent continuing professional development had been left to the individual social worker.

In most of the countries, child and family social work services are provided by a combination of locality-based social service departments, health authorities or the voluntary (NGO) sector. In the US, and increasingly in England the private for-profit sector is commissioned by the public sector to provide a range of services. However, in each country some experienced social workers, as individuals or in small groups, provide social work or training services under contract to the statutory agencies and (in US and Israel) to fee-paying private clients.

Those contributing to the survey varied in age from late 30s to mid-70s, with 80 % being over 55. Their years in direct social work practice or with some accountability for direct practice ranged from 8[II] to 40+, with over half having 30 or more years' experience in child and family social services work.

More than half (16) qualified as social workers between the ages of 18 and 25, and a further seven aged between 25 and 30, but five (all from Anglophone nations) qualified when aged over 30 (one of whom was over 50 at qualification).

Equal numbers gained their social work qualification at Master's degree level and at Bachelors/ Professional Diploma level (including four with degrees in social education). Additionally, two had PhDs and eight had diplomas in advanced practice, specialist methods or leadership and a further four had completed a non-certificated post-qualifying specialist methods training.

They had experienced a range of work roles, which for most changed during their careers. The most common pattern was to start with generalist front-line/ neighbourhood practice or residential child care and move to a more specialist role. Eight moved from direct practice to senior practitioner and then more senior management or quality assurance roles. Almost half moved from direct practice via a practice leadership to an educator role including student practice supervision. Nineteen worked throughout their careers for the public sector, most in locality child and family service or specialist child services, but four worked in health care settings. Four worked throughout their careers in the NGO/charitable sector. Four worked both in the state and the NGO sector and four worked in the state and private sectors.

Three examples of career paths (from different countries)

'Started as a family case worker in a NGO social services agency; then child protection worker in statutory agency. Then team manager, manager and regional director of local government family and children services. Headed up the planning research and development department. For last 6 years work independently as trainer and teacher of child and family social workers in different positions (family caseworkers, managers, and senior staff) also provide consultation for social services agencies.'

'For a majority of my social work career, I have worked in child welfare providing therapeutic and support services to children in foster care as well as children who have been adopted both domestically and internationally. Most of this work was provided to families in their homes and communities rather than from a clinical setting. Currently, I provide support to families who have infants in the intensive care unit at a major hospital'.

'Fieldwork social worker in an inner city: full range of duties relating to child protection, children in care, adoption and youth justice work. Then social worker and moved on to be practice manager in an intake team in a different public sector agency. Then team manager of a children in care team. For several years combined this with student practice teaching. Promoted within same statutory agency to post as Service Manager - responsible for delivery of assessment, child protection, home based support and family support teams.

Key themes and messages to be passed on

There was considerable overlap across themes and much in common from the different countries. Because of the small numbers, we have not analysed the findings according to nationality of contributor but provide illustrative comments from across the nations represented (country identifiers not allocated alphabetically). The main themes were:

- Values and personal qualities that must permeate working with communities and all family members;
- Attitudes to the profession of social work and career choices;
- The centrality of relationship-based practice;
- Messages about choice of practice approaches and specific methods.

Additional themes emerging were:

- the importance of working collaboratively - with family members, foster/residential carers, team colleagues and across professions/agencies;
- choices to be made on employment setting- including the impact on the practitioner of differing management styles and approaches to service delivery;
- the importance of professional supervision and ensuring opportunities for continued learning and professional development.

Values and personal qualities

The largest number of comments come under this theme. It was widely recognised that whilst the opportunity to engage in child and family practice is an enormous privilege with many opportunities for professional and personal rewards, it also brings profound responsibility, especially in relation to complex decision-making. The importance of maintaining the highest level of respect for families figured prominently and was often linked to the core elements of professional and personal integrity and rigorous ethical practice.

Throughout my career as an agent of social intervention I have realised there are three fundamental principles for success: resilience and never giving up; otherness, or to be able to recognize the other; and ethics - respecting the other without hurting one's own convictions (country 1).

Working with people is a wonderful privilege, but one of great responsibility (country 8)

Comments were often linked with the importance of continuity, trust and honesty. The comments also highlighted the need to be aware of the differences in power relations, within families and between social workers and family members.

Be empathetic with service users. A common mistake I see is when inexperienced social workers see an emotional reaction by a service user to challenge or bad news as negative, hostile or aggressive. It is okay for people to be sad or angry and it is normal for people to shout or shut down (country 3).

Respect for children of all age groups including the severely disabled was specifically mentioned. Though this figured in all responses, respondents from Spain and Portugal were particularly forthcoming on this point.

The contribution and cooperation of children and young people is essential for the positive impact of our actions. The words, opinions, revelations, complaints of children and adolescents must be taken seriously (country 8).

Attitudes to the profession of social work and career choices

A large proportion of the comments belong under this theme, some of which addressed survival skills within a profession that is often not given high respect and sometimes comes under fire from the media when things go wrong. Respondents stressed the importance of maintaining strong identification with social work as a profession, even in the face of public criticism.

We are co-responsible for the destiny of the profession, and this responsibility can be faced with professional commitment and ethical rigor, each of us in his/her own role (country 4).

There were two distinct sub-themes.

The personal and professional self
Respondents emphasized the critical roles of self-care, supervision, stress management and reflective practice.

Continual reflective work on myself was key to being successful in this profession. It is so important to know yourself and how you tick and continually develop yourself as the tool of social work, particularly if you have had a challenging life journey yourself as you may be constantly confronted with triggers and your acknowledgement and management of these issues are essential (country 9).

Change comes in small increments, and you have to be on the lookout for it. It is much easier to dwell on the difficulties people are dealing with, than the positive things that happen (country 5).

Self-care and the importance of support and professional supervision

Career success and satisfaction was also associated with staying abreast of contemporary developments in policy, practice and research.

Develop a mental and organizational approach that keeps still the boundaries of the profession, in the face of workloads and the emotional impact of situations (country 4).

Finding ways to challenge colleagues/culture when work culture is not congruent with social work values. Not at all easy! (country 7).

Try to find/make time to keep up with relevant research in your area of work and ask for help from your organisation to do this - e.g., in team or area office presentations, chances to discuss, etc. (country 3).

Messages about choice of practice approaches and specific methods

Regardless of the particular theory or method that informed their work, each contributor stressed the central importance of relational practice. Respondents also emphasised the importance of undertaking thorough assessments prior to intervention and of recognising small steps on the way to larger change.

Spend a lot of time building relationship and developing trust, particularly if you want to work at a deeper level as opposed to just working with the surface issues (country 9).

The impact of 'care and control' elements of social work on the way in which social worker / client relationships were understood figured in these comments.

Learn to be open, honest and confident with service users. It is hard to do this when you are challenging someone or sharing bad news but I consistently got feedback that people liked it when they were challenged or given information properly. Being nervous or holding back information causes a lot of problems (country 3).

There were fewer messages about specific practice methods than there were about attitudes and values. Most of these were about broad approaches and there was a cross-over between these comments and those about values and attitudes towards parents and children. Being able to flexibly apply a range of conceptual frames of reference in response to diverse contextual parameters was considered a core element of successful practice. Over-reliance on protocols and regulations for practice was warned against by most respondents across countries.

Theory must be suitable for practice. Realizing that theories are guidelines that help frame and analyse but must necessarily be adjusted to the situation of the individual, family and. cultural reality of that territory (country 1).

Insofar as any particular approach was identifiable, it would be around strengths-based/ ecological models, and also 'team around the family' and 'inter-disciplinary' and 'rights-based' approaches.

Be creative, use the family's strengths and resources, help them rediscover and reconnect to, who they are, especially where extended family are concerned. At the same time make every effort to mobilize community and professional resources to help meet their identified needs (country 9).

People live in societies and are influenced by social processes and policy-based actions. In these situations, they are active agents. We always need to remember that and help people to see the context in which they live and their struggle in this context. We also should intervene in the wider circles - social and policy level in order to help people achieve their rights (country 5).

Advice to new practitioners tended to be more along the lines, as one respondent put it, of 'ploughing your own furrow rather than 'practice handbook' responses'.

An over-arching message was that theories should be absorbed and updated but ***integrated into a personal style of practice and tailored to the needs of each family and each family member.*** These appeared in both recommendations and pitfalls to be avoided.

Professional models are mostly "technocratic" and sticking by a [particular] professional approach does not facilitate, and often prevents, the empowerment and the self-realization of the person needing help (country 8).

Cross-agency/ inter-disciplinary practice was recommended from all the countries represented, at the policy as well as direct practice level.

We also should intervene in the wider circles - social and policy level in order to help people achieve their rights (country 5).

Multidisciplinary work is tiring but successful. It is necessary to develop integrated working models and competences among different professionals in order to be able to deal adequately with the complexity of problems (country 4).

However, there were warnings that a ***strong identity as a social worker*** was needed when working with other 'higher status' professionals. The need for a 'salad not soup' approach (other and author, 2017) was flagged up by several and repeated in the pitfalls section where the risk of the social work approach and 'voice' being drowned out was warned against.

It is important to look for opportunities and create them, to meet with colleagues, but also

with colleagues from other professions, as long as you are aware of your identity (country 4).

Specific social work methods and skills

As can be seen from the above quotes, there was more emphasis on broader approaches to social work than on recommendations for the use of specific methods or skills. Where particular methods were referred to such as 'crisis' or 'systems' this was usually with reference to practice being informed by a broader theoretical analysis. Technique or method was most likely to be mentioned when linked with the importance of careful assessment. Identifying strengths in the child and family and recognizing opportunities for change were considered critical to positive outcomes.

Importance of a holistic approach and active involvement of the "family" system as a place of problems and resources (country 4).

Crisis and trauma can provide opportunity for growth (country 4).

Be an agent of change. At times, it can be overwhelming and frustrating to work within systems that may feel broken or prove to be barriers to your particular child/ family's success (country 2).

Responses to the question about pitfalls to be avoided

When pitfalls were mentioned, and there were far fewer of them than positive messages, they were usually accompanied by messages about how to surmount them. Most frequently mentioned were organisational cultures, often linked to lack of resources, and especially time needed to provide an ethical professional service. Several respondents linked this with inadequate time for team discussion and professional support and supervision, or to work directly with children.

The lack of space for ethical reflection of the teams (country 8).

Parents/carers are often vulnerable and needy and can take up the majority of the space in the social worker/family interaction. This may be especially unbalanced where the child is very small, in which cases the worker must make particular efforts to assess and respond to the needs of the child (country 3).

[It is a mistake] to think that the protection procedures should not be explained to children because they have difficulties in understanding and because it could cause suffering (country 4).

Pitfalls were sometimes linked to **negative views of the profession**, or the perceived superiority of the knowledge base and expertise of other professions.

Academic corporatism and the power of 'clinical' professionals (psychologists, doctors and psychiatrists) when set alongside the "social" professions (country 8).

Inappropriately bureaucratic or inflexible or fragmented administrative, legal or management systems were also referred to as constraints on good practice. Over-identification with one's organisation and its procedures and obscuring the truth when communicating with families and children were also seen to be potential pitfalls.

Purely legal approaches and the systematic use of instructions and protocols undermine professional autonomy and the right to be a unique case (country 8).

Lack of trust in the "other" in the network can lead to deficiencies in the transfer of relevant information, depriving them of the possibility of an accurate assessment of the situation (country 4).

These more personal lessons from experience talked of pitfalls to be avoided, including times when boundaries might be inappropriately crossed under the pressure of wanting to alleviate family stresses.

I wasn't being honest about how my own personal life experiences were impacting my judgments, views and reactions to those I was working with. I feared talking about this because I know my role as the social worker is to maintain objectivity however, by ignoring it I wasn't allowing myself to work through it. Through the years I have learned that this level of insight is imperative (country 2).

Boredom. May be tied to burnout. When one begins to feel that you're doing the same thing over and over, it is time to look for a change of team or another job (country 3).

Taking heed of personal feelings and boundaries in relation to safety and wellbeing, especially when working within the family home, was highly recommended.

When a family member says mind the cat/dog/rabbit/parrot/hamster/gerbil/chicken/ goat/lizard/owl/snake/pony/budgie - listen to them. But, you are not Dr Doolittle by virtue of your social work training (country 3).

Inadequacies in the qualifying training of colleagues and insufficient access to post qualifying training and research were also mentioned and linked with inadequate skills.

Lack of training on the needs of children and adolescents and knowledge of their rights (country 4).

Some were about personal and family pressures:

Low salary. Social workers are typically underpaid and undervalued. I worked around this by opening a part-time private practice to

supplement income from my jobs in the public sector (country 5).

Making assumptions, about so many things... culture, capacity, needs, wants, role, own ability, others willingness/commitment (country 7).

Feel omnipotent, fear failures (country 4).

Responses to the question about messages for social work educators

There was a large number of comments on approaches to training as well as on the knowledge needed for a successful career in social work and these were linked with comments about what should be included within qualifying and post qualifying curricula. A common theme was the importance of a broad knowledge base - across academic disciplines including social theory, social policy, psychology, child and adult development; philosophy/ethics, welfare law and human and child rights.

Importance of learning other academic disciplines and not only those related to the degree in social work (country 8).

Have a regular overview on local, national and international law, policy and practice. It has underpinned my experience that practice, research and theory throughout my career has developed and morphed, sometimes with the ebb and flow of political tides, often as a consequence of terrible harm and loss befalling a vulnerable child and their family (country 3).

International perspective allows for different ways of thinking (country 4).

A wide range of observations was made about the educational experience, and about approaches, methods and curriculum content of initial training.

Courses must encourage a vision of social work in harmony with social policies: considered as rights of citizenship and a protection for assisted persons (country 8).

Collaborative learning with service users, practitioners and students It is possible to create and plan training sequences such as research with the collaboration of students, volunteers, etc. (country 4).

Adopt teaching processes that ensure robust discussion. Ensure time to discuss practice and theory in student peer groups (country 3).

A frequently expressed view was that qualifying training should remain close to current practice and should draw heavily on case-based learning. The importance of teaching staff impressing on students that they should insist on professional supervision and continued learning opportunities after qualifying was another recurring theme.

Never stop learning. It is easy to get caught up in the day to day tasks of your position. Make the time to attend seminars..... read up to date research and literature, seek out supervision and gain insight from colleagues (country 2).

4. Strengths and limitations of the research

An important limitation is that all the participants were from 'rich' countries with developed child welfare systems and no claim can be made for relevance beyond this context.

Given that the number of participants is small, and neither a random nor a purposive sample, we cannot claim representativeness of long serving child and family social workers, nor of those working in the different countries referred to. Identified, as they were, because they have extensive experience as qualified social workers, and known to be respected by colleagues, it was to be expected that they would give careful thought to their choice of words and opinions and this proved to be the case. However, this method of identifying the sample will almost certainly have meant that the views of less highly committed workers, who might have had more to say about challenges and pitfalls, are under-represented.

A considerable degree of consistency in themes and similarities between contributions from different countries give some confidence that respondents were speaking of the underpinning aspects of practising as child and family social workers. We have not tried to draw out lessons for social workers with other age and needs groups, but anticipate that the reader may well see crossovers as well as differences.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The future for those who need social work services as well as for the profession and those starting out on social work careers holds much that is concerning, as we are reminded by Webb (2006, 2019). Inequalities are increasing and confidence in solidarity-based welfare systems is decreasing. Responses must be sought to these current day challenges which are personal and professional but also ethical and political.

The messages collected here are a distillation of the knowledge and professional wisdom shared by a small number of long-serving child and family social workers, who have practiced in different welfare cultures within 'rich' countries. It differs from some papers in this field which concentrate on early career staff and from others that focus on those who remain with a particular employer or

in a specialist area of practice (Burns, 2011; Burns et al, 2019). Our respondents have all remained as social workers or close to direct practice for on average 30 years. As well as reporting on their reflections, the paper may offer insights on why some social workers leave early and others stay throughout their working lives.

The themes which emerge are similar to those identified by other scholars who report on longer-stayers. In particular, they echo the conclusion of Collins (2008) who encourages researchers to explore the positive experiences and characteristics of the work rather than the stresses associated with early leavers. Themes identified that replicate those in other studies include 'resilience' 'job satisfaction' and 'organisational support' and the negative impact of organisational issues that cut across the ability to work in a way that fits with professional knowledge, values and aspirations.

The respondents took the opportunity to reflect on how they had incorporated into their ethical and relationship-based practice, both legislative and managerial requirements. They write of valuing the knowledge and skills acquired in training and which they have refreshed with new insights. In particular, they advise beginning social workers to realise that *'theories are guidelines that help frame and analyze, but must necessarily be adjusted to the situation of the individual, family, and cultural reality of that territory'*. There is an echo here of Bisman's (2004) conclusions on the importance of knowledge and values as well as skills in the social work knowledge-base and on the survey conducted by Canali et al, (2017) on the meaning of professional choices of social workers when confronting family poverty.

The messages we report represent challenges to beginning social workers that are ethical, professional and personal. The answers speak of a professional discipline based on listening, dialogue, sharing of responsibility, and being in tune with personal issues and capacities that can change over time. What these respondents describe is a 'human relationship', with their chosen profession as well as with their clients and colleagues.

They share strategies that have allowed them to negotiate a way through overly bureaucratic obstacles and, at times, risks to their personal selves and family wellbeing, to help adults and children for whom 'the best' is too often beyond reach but 'good enough' outcomes of their work can pave the way to positive futures. They speak of strategies to balance the power dynamic in relationships with strength and delicacy. The motivation to find ways through disappointments comes in part from reminding themselves that this is a profession which they have chosen and which has brought them personal and professional rewards: *Working with people is a wonderful privilege, but a great responsibility.*

Knowledge about early career child and family social workers is improving but we know less about longer stayers. This paper provides some insights but points to the need for more knowledge about those who spend their whole career in one aspect or another of child and family social work. They are the ones who, whether within their social work practice teams, amongst colleagues whose lives they cross, or within the policy, political or educational arenas, can have a major impact on the profession and the lives of the children and families who need social work services.

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Notes

[I] We use the term 'long-serving social workers' since despite different career trajectories, all self-identified as social workers or very recently retired social workers, or as 'social educators' fulfilling a similar role with children and families. Not all worked in systems where 'protected title' and social work registration were possible.

[II] Two undertook social work training as mature students after many years in family support and as community activists

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