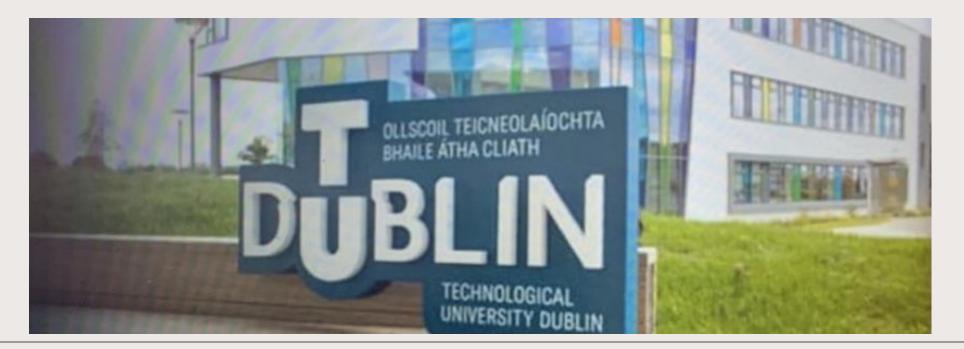# Creating Connections: Social Care student experiences of navigating relationships on practice placement

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Aim: Examine social care students experience of developing and maintaining relationships with service users while on placement
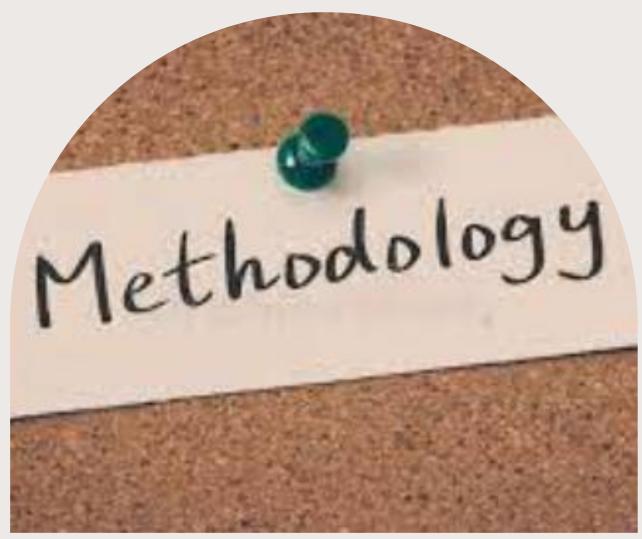
Objectives:

1. Examine preparatory measures for relationship building ahead of placement

2. Identify the supports available to students while on placement to assist in navigating the relationship process

3. Explore challenges that may exist in developing and maintaining relationships with service users while on placement

Significance of study

- What is working
- How to best prepare and support students
- Explore any challenges
- How do we know relationships have been successfully built?

- Focus group (n = 3)

- Fourth year Social Care students in TU Dublin – Blanchardstown campus

- 800 hours of placement – across two settings

Developing and Maintaining

Genuineness and trust

Identified by research as important qualities

Echoed by participants: "*Earn trust", "Time", "L*et them know you're there"

Ultimately "U*p to them whether they build a relationship with you or not"*

Skills and Qualities

Importance of informal learning activities, theory & skill development

Participants noted giving service users *"space", "using own tools", "finding a common interest*" as key

Positive outcomes & wellbeing

Providing students with opportunities to engage with service users is vital for their learning and professional development (Bogo, 2015).

Study revealed the positive impact of the student/service user relationship as the young person was "*engaging more in what was going on in the house*", "*grabbing me for a talk because they feel like they can talk to me*".

- Practice modules:
theoretical frameworks examined
and explored, comparisons and
examples utilised - foundation

- One participant felt they were prepared for
some service user groups more
than others: *"I feel like with most of
the modules [...] learning how to build
relationships with young teenagers or
adults with disabilities".*

- All acknowledged theory to practice:
*"communication skills and
interpersonal skills in college [...] that is still
applied to any service
user group", "the theory [...] is great and we
do use them all"*

- Placement agency preparation – *"hobbies"*

Challenges

Students share the lived space with service users and while this creates a valuable opportunity to establish a relationship it's not without its challenges (Rodd & Stewart, 2009).

Concepts of power imbalance and personal values explored

- Power imbalance: *"I feel like the service users automatically feel like you're above them because you work there"*.

- Navigating personal values when in conflict with those of service users.

Speaking about service users in addiction who have had their children received into the care system, participant noted *"You can't let that affect building relationships. [...] can't let it be a trigger. "Can't let it interfere or have a negative impact on how you interact"*.

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Supports

- Literature suggests the importance of the supervisory relationship in navigating relational processes and found a supportive relationship contributed to learning - allowed for 'mistakes, acknowledge difficulties' and to 'accept and use critical feedback' (Lefevre, 2005).

- Placement agency supports can be a key determinator in relational processes. One participant noted additional '*layer of protection*' as a student.

- Participants placed importance on receiving ''*ongoing support*'' from the supervisor and the significance of autonomy.

Finishing placement

- All participants noted advance preparation with service users as paramount
- *"I found myself getting a bit attached"*
- Another person *''going to leave''*.
- Relief work
- Feedback - value

Remaining questions for reflection

- Impact of covid 19 on full placement experience

- Implications for higher education

- Implications of impact on service users and agencies

- Supports, preparation

- Questions still remain.

References

- Bogo, M. (2015). Field education for clinical social work practice: Best practices and contemporary challenges. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 43*(3), 317–324.

- Rodd, Helen & Stewart, H. (2009). The glue that holds our work together: The role and nature of relationships in youth work. Youth Studies Australia. 28. 4-10.