

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/139627/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Maxwell, Nina 2022. Using programme theory to identify the key elements of the Frontline programme. *Social Work Education* 41 (5) , pp. 926-942.
10.1080/02615479.2021.1903415

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1903415>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Social Work Education

Using programme theory to identify the key elements of the Frontline programme.

Nina Maxwell

CASCADE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales

Nina Maxwell, Cascade, School of Social Sciences, 1-3 Museum Place, Cardiff, CF10 3BD. Email: MaxwellN2@Cardiff.ac.uk

Using a programme theory approach, this paper aims to identify the key elements of the Frontline fast-track training scheme for social workers in children's services in England. Programme logic is developed and refined based on findings from the pilot stage of the Frontline model regarding what was described as working well and what proved challenging. Findings revealed an association between the recruitment of high calibre entrants and the training model where entrants possessed good analytical skills but little previous practical knowledge. The Consultant Social Worker was identified as a critical component, linking all other elements of the programme theory and overseeing the participant unit which emerged as the central mechanism enabling discussion, consideration of theory-practice transfer and reflection.

Keywords: social work education, fast track, programme theory

Introduction

Since its inception in 2013, Frontline has enrolled over 1000 participants onto its programme. Frontline is a fast-track training programme aimed at attracting high calibre graduates and career changers into children's social work. In 2019, the UK Government invested a further £45 million for Frontline to train 900 social workers by 2021 (UK Government, 2019). Frontline students receive between £16,000 and £22,000 in their first year and a newly qualified social worker salary in their second year of study. This financial commitment is in addition to the higher training costs; the unit cost for

Frontline participants is up to three times higher than the traditional undergraduate route (Cutmore & Roger, 2016). This investment signifies government endorsement of a partial shift away from traditional university social work courses to employment-based fast-track training primarily directed at the provision of child protection social workers. Such endorsement is based upon the perceived need to ‘radically improve’ the quality of children’s social work (Department for Education, 2014:13). Indeed, the government commissioned two key reports in 2013; Professor Croisedale-Appleby’s (2014) review of social work education and Sir Martin Narey’s (2014) review of social work education and training for children and families social work. However, the need for improved social work education and training has been subject to criticism, with some authors calling for increased investment in existing social work education rather than the introduction of a new programme (Murphy, 2016).

Unlike traditional university courses, the Frontline training model adopted systemic practice as its single overarching theoretical framework and focused upon two evidence-based interventions; motivational interviewing and a parenting programme based on social learning theory. Further, the programme incorporated the participant unit model, based on the Reclaiming Social Work initiative developed in Hackney, a London Borough (Cross et al., 2010). Frontline has attracted much attention, in part because of its bold claims, including its mission to ‘transform the lives of vulnerable children by recruiting and developing outstanding individuals to be leaders in social work and broader society’ (Frontline, 2014). Such claims have led to criticism that Frontline’s re-direction of social work education towards high calibre elite graduates may serve to diminish the extent to which future social workers advocate for children and families, the degree to which they challenge individualised notions, such as poor parenting, and wider considerations of poverty and social inequalities (Murphy, 2016).

Frontline's focus on child protection and focus on a single theoretical framework has also been criticised (e.g. Croisedale-Appleby, 2014; Thoburn, 2017). Although it should be noted that its focus on children represents the structural division of children and adult social work in England and Wales. Adult social care sits within the Department for Health and Social Care whereas the Department for Education are responsible for children and families. Croisedale-Appleby (2014), expressed concern that the emergence of a training model focused upon children might produce social workers 'inadequately informed and qualified to understand the various perspectives in any situation' (p. 27). Others warned that separating child protection from other forms of social work creates a system aimed at risk-focused practice rather than prevention and empowering service users (Featherstone et al., 2014; Higgins, 2015). Such an approach reflects disquiet that fast track programmes teach practice skills rather than knowledge-based practice as Cartney states,

A pertinent issue is whether social work is simply about 'know how' (skills) or also about 'know why' (knowledge), and whether we are moving away from promoting in-depth understanding and towards employment-based skills teaching as the primary underpinning for qualifying education (Cartney, 2017:7)

This distinction is crucial as it differentiates between a system based on managing risk to one which challenges social inequalities fostering anti-oppressive practice. For social work education the issue is whether fast-track courses equip participants with both the skills and knowledge necessary to work in a humane manner with the family and in relation to wider issues such as social inequalities (Featherstone et al., 2014). Hence, both the focus on children and the adoption of specific approaches have led some to argue that fast-track programmes simply produce 'skilled technicians' as opposed to educated professionals (Cartney, 2017). This is particularly pertinent in light of

Frontline's decision to design and deliver the programme in-house, without its academic partner (McNicoll, 2017).

This paper reports findings relating to the pilot stage of Frontline in six local authorities focusing on the identification and evaluation of key elements of the Frontline training model. Findings are presented from the Department for Education funded independent evaluation of the Frontline pilot undertaken between 2014 and 2016 (Maxwell et al., 2016). The evaluation adopted a programme theory approach to create and refine programme logic for the training model. This responds to the growing call for service providers to demonstrate the underlying models and theories on which programmes are based. While theory-driven evaluation is already adopted in the fields of public health, and crime and safety, its use in social work is relatively new (Ebenso et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2017). Programme theory comprises a range of approaches including logical frameworks, realistic evaluation, and theory of change (Coryn et al., 2010). Regardless of terminology, theory-driven approaches share a common base where the evaluation strategy or approach,

explicitly integrates and uses stakeholder, social science, some combination of, or other types of theories in conceptualizing, designing, conducting, interpreting, and applying an evaluation (Coryn et al., 2010:201).

In doing so, theory-driven evaluation begins by identifying the underlying assumptions, or theories, of a programme or intervention that lead to the desired outcomes. Logic models are commonly employed for this task as they enable the visual representation of programme components in a linear, columnar manner, enabling causal linkages to be made between components (Kellogg Foundation, 2004; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). Logic models vary in their level of complexity with some delineating between short,

medium, and long-term outcomes whilst others include individual, interpersonal and collective perspectives. Nevertheless, logic models enable the identification of the anticipated pathway of the programme and encompass features of the external environment (Morgan-Trimmer, 2015). This paper begins by describing the process by which Frontline's programme logic model was created. Once the initial theory had been depicted, empirical investigation was undertaken to determine the extent to which the theory was met in practice across implementation and varying contexts (Manzano & Pawson, 2014). The logic model added value to empirical investigation as it enabled consideration of how the programme components inter-related, consideration of the causal mechanisms and the designation of appropriate data collection methods in order to determine support for the programme theory (Cooksy et al., 2001). The paper then presents research findings from the evaluation in order to refine the logic model, based on discussion of how it worked in practice in the pilot, drawing out what was described as working well and what proved challenging.

Method

Documentary analysis informed programme logic design. Documents were obtained from Frontline as part of the independent evaluation and supplemented via a Google search using 'Frontline social work' as the search term. Documents included the initial briefing document 'Frontline: improving the children's social work profession' (MacAlister et al., 2012), the Programme Handbook, information presented on the Frontline website, media reports and wider advertising materials. Comparison of the training model was undertaken based on evidence gleaned from the course handbooks for two randomly selected postgraduate social work courses from high tariff universities. The programme logic was refined using interview data, described below.

Participants

The evaluation adopted a case study approach, recruiting local authorities from two Frontline pilot regions across two cohorts of participants. Ethical approval for the study was granted from [institution name] School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Six local authorities were selected to be case studies based on a combination of stratified random sampling and purposive sampling. Sampling included four criteria; children's social care service inspection rating, number of Frontline units per local authority, geographical location, and to ensure that all three 'Frontline Specialists' (responsible for providing support to each local authority and coaching the consultant social workers) were included.

Data collection

Data were collected between August 2014 and November 2015. The evaluation began when the first cohort of the Frontline programme started training and ended four months into cohort two, with the first cohort having completed year one of the programme. Interviews were undertaken with cohort one case studies around three months into practice learning (T1), after seven months (T2) and after 12 months (T3). Interviews were conducted with cohort two three months into their practice learning (T4). Interviews were conducted with consultant social workers (CSWs) across all four time points whilst participants were interviewed at T1, T3 and T4 with a focus group conducted at T3. At T1 and T4 telephone interviews were also conducted with academic tutors and Frontline Specialists whilst T3 included telephone interviews with adult placement mentors, service users and key stakeholders (Frontline's Chief Executive, the lead professor for Frontline, and two Frontline specialists). In addition, senior staff within each local authority (LA) were sent a questionnaire inviting them to reflect upon Cohort One. Only one response was received.

Data analysis

Data was analysed according to grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). All the interviews and focus groups from the case studies were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a coding frame initially devised from the evaluation's logic model, including inputs, participant reactions, mediating factors, participants' learning, moderating factors, and outcomes. The coding frame was then subject to refinement based on inductive coding from the data. N-vivo software was used to facilitate thematic coding.

Step one: Generating Frontline's programme theory

Programme theory design drew upon Kirkpatrick's model (1994), which provides a systematic outcome-based method of evaluation which allows analysis of multiple measures of training effectiveness (Bates, 2004). The evaluation extended beyond learner satisfaction to include learner reaction to the programme; learning gained from the programme (e.g. knowledge, skills and attitudes); changes in learner behaviour within the training context; and the desired results or impact of the programme. Following Guskey (2000), learner behaviour was further distinguished by defining behaviour as the 'use of new knowledge and skills' and 'results' as specific training 'outcomes'.

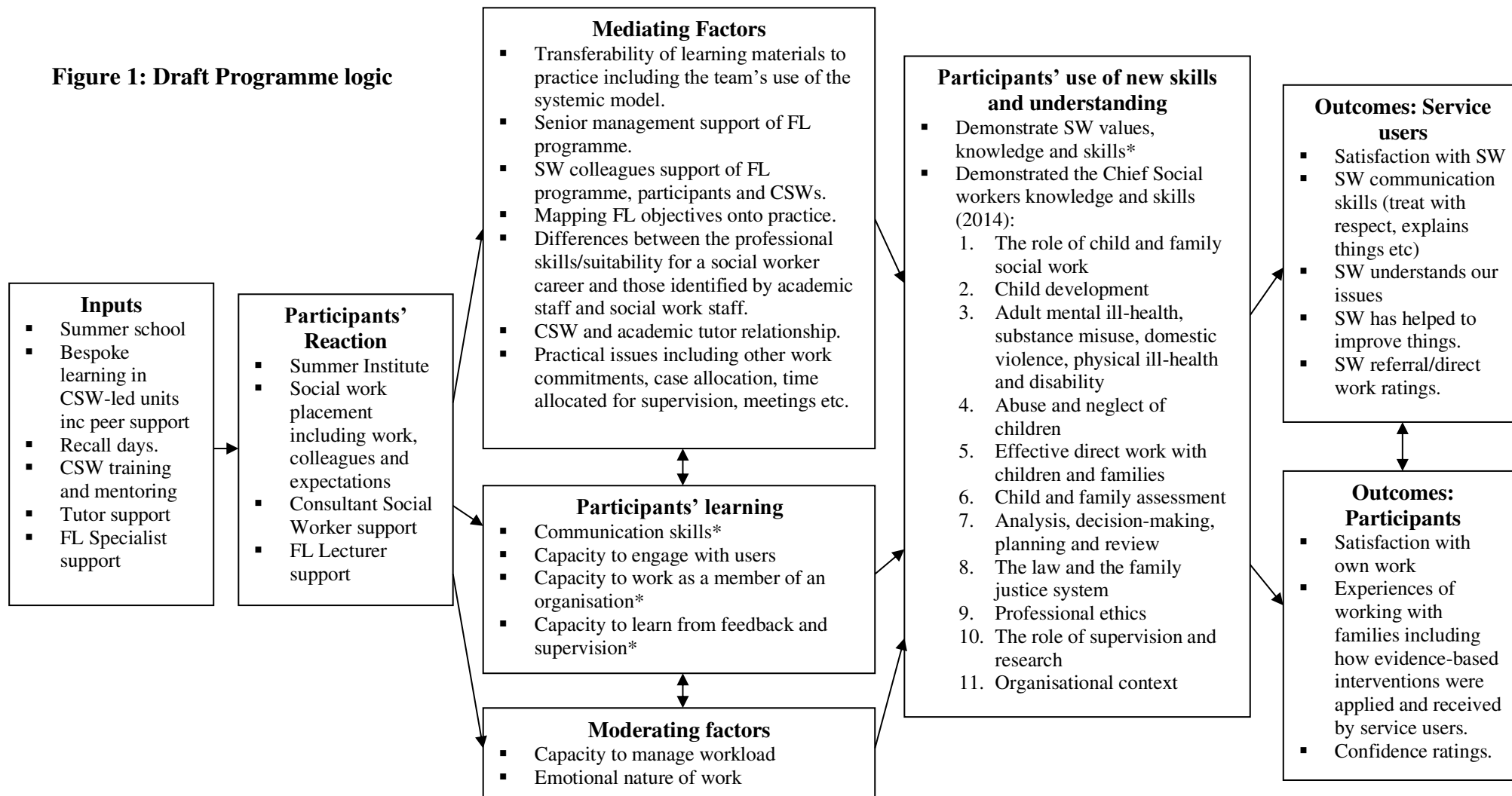
Documents were reviewed and sentences relating to the main components of the logic model were marked and used to create the logic model (Figure one). Each component was then associated with a series of statements that were used to form a clearer picture of the component. Whilst programme inputs, expected use of new skills and understanding and outcomes could be gleaned, further data was needed to identify

the optimum conditions necessary for the programme to realise its outcomes. Hence, the initial logic model contained questions within components where further evidence was needed. For example, is CSW knowledge and skills a necessary condition for participant learning to occur? Findings from each phase of the evaluation were used to determine how the programme evolved in practice (Ebenso et al., 2018). By working with Frontline developers, the evaluation adopted a formative approach enabling the refinement and modification of the Frontline training model throughout the evaluation. Consequently, the programme logic was refined to determine the extent to which the theory was met in practice across implementation and varying contexts (Manzano & Pawson, 2014).

Frontline's theory of change

According to MacAlister et al.'s (2012) briefing document, Frontline was developed in response to increasing concerns about social work education (e.g. Munro, 2010; Social Work Taskforce, 2009). There have been two key reports (Croisedale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014) outlining the nature of the problem, including the need for minimum entry standards and streamlining social work education standards and competencies to aid consistency across higher education institutions. Frontline's proposed solution was to target high calibre graduates from elite universities who may not have previously considered a career in social work, reduce the amount of classroom-based learning and embed practice learning into the training model (Frontline, 2014).

Figure 1: Draft Programme logic



**Taken from Professional Capabilities Framework*

Target audience

Documentary analysis revealed that in order to recruit high calibre entrants, applicants underwent a rigorous recruitment process which included a verbal reasoning test, written exercise, simulated client interview and a joint interview undertaken by Frontline and the placement Local Authority. Hence, Frontline's 'target audience', of high calibre graduates was a key component of Frontline. While the evaluation did not assess the calibre of entrants, comparative analyses between Frontline and mainstream participants have demonstrated that Frontline entrants have significantly better prior academic qualifications than participants on mainstream courses (see Maxwell et al., 2018). Interview analysis found that Frontline participants were considered particularly adept at understanding and assessing different theoretical perspectives,

Their ability to access a theory and then relate it to practice, to challenge practice, to consider perspectives, to critically analyse their own work, to critically analyse the things that are going on in families. Honestly, it's just amazing (CSW 4)

But targeting entrants who had not hitherto considered a career in social work, meant that in the early stages participants were unsure of what social work entailed or lacked lived experiences to draw upon,

I felt there was a lot missing in terms of the things social workers do. A lot of knowledge of things like, just kind of practical stuff, even just how much a baby eats or how much they should sleep and stuff ... I find it helpful now but without a context of kind of – it's helpful now because I have a context of families
(Participant O)

Consultant social workers highlighted the need for participants to adapt from being high achievers to good social workers, able to carry uncertainty in complex, changing family systems.

Inputs

The training model consisted of a five-week classroom-based residential course and twenty recall days. To support learning in situ, three key components were identified, the academic tutor, the participant unit and the CSW. Unlike mainstream courses, academic tutors had a greater active role in supporting participant learning by contributing to unit meeting discussions, forming conceptual links between practice and theory, and providing bespoke tuition; although this was limited by course demands and the extent to which academic tutors attended meetings. Academic tutors were also able to support participant learning by the introduction of practice observations, which enabled them to observe the application of theory to practice, rather than relying upon the participant's written account (Domakin & Curry, 2018). Unlike mainstream courses which tend to adopt binary pass-fail overall grading for practice skills, participants skills were awarded a percentage mark where,

The focus on direct observations of practice as a core part of what we assessed, having that as the focus of about half of the marks created an ethos where the focus was on practice (Lead Professor)

Interview analysis revealed that the participant unit was the central mechanism by which learning occurred. Overseen by a CSW, the unit of four participants provided a safe space to critically engage with theory and practice, a place to view existing social work practice and experience the realities of working within an existing social work team. This was facilitated by the model's adoption of a single theoretical framework; systemic practice as it,

recognise[s] that any intervention with a family may be influenced by a dynamic interplay between the response of the individual social worker, relationships between family members, agency setting, and wider structural issues (Domakin and Curry, 2018:172).

Unit meetings were aimed at decision making, planning and engagement in learning discussions. Meetings began with the presentation of a case genogram (a family tree diagram depicting relationships) and chronology before the participant presented their case dilemma (Domakin & Curry, 2018). Finally, the unit generated hypotheses in response to the dilemma relating to what is known about the family,

If I were to present a dilemma, we'd discuss it and then the other people in the meeting would hypothesise about it and then at the end there'd be action planning (Participant N)

Observational data captured the role of the CSW and academic tutor in contributing professional and academic guidance, encouraging discussion around the themes of social injustice, poverty and anti-oppressive practice. Several commentators have queried the extent to which the training model captures these issues, questioning whether fast-track programmes prepare future social workers to advocate for families and challenge wider structural considerations (Murphy, 2016; Thoburn, 2017). More recently, George Floyd's killing in America and the subsequent Black Lives Matter campaign prompted several Frontline trainees to question the adequacy of Frontline's inclusion of anti-racism and anti-oppressive practice within the programme (Turner, 2020). The evaluation data presented illustrated the manner in which social injustice, poverty, and anti-oppressive practice learning was embedded in practice and where the unit provided the space for lively discussion and consideration of the social and economic conditions on families. While findings from a simulated exercise found that Frontline participants were rated higher on cultural competence than their counterparts from mainstream social work courses (see Scourfield et al., 2019).

Learning was facilitated by the CSW who was responsible for ensuring that the unit received a range of cases,

I'm clear about the experiences that the participants need to have in practice but then I have a responsibility to make sure that those experiences are coming (CSW 3)

At T1 this proved demanding for CSWs who were responsible for delivering practice knowledge to participants top-loaded with theory, which was compounded by the front-loading of assignments. By T2, when the focus was on practice-driven learning, the participant unit emerged as the primary training input with the level of CSW knowledge and expertise deemed "critical in ensuring the success of the programme" (Children's Services Director). The Chief Executive of Frontline noted in his T3 interview that it had sometimes been challenging to recruit high quality CSWs but noted that this challenge had been overcome. Hence, the CSW emerged as a critical component across all elements of the training model.

Interview analysis revealed three main aspects of the CSW role; manager, coach and mentor. The role of manager encompassed the identification of suitable cases to develop participant skills, assigning tasks to participants and monitoring task completion and performance. The CSWs role as a coach, alluded to their role in observing participant practice, providing feedback on individual skill acquisition and development as well as modelling good practice during family visits, ensuring that participants "learnt the basics",

So there's a lot of them practising it, learning it, practising it, learning it, ... and I think they've really done well with that I think it's a good idea that you don't have multiple managers, because we all have a different take on how to do things. So, they've learnt the basics from me and then they will add their own context to that ... what they feel is really important. (CSW 4)

Finally, the CSWs role as a mentor involved supporting participant growth, both professionally and personally,

ultimately, she [CSW] oversees all of that and a huge amount of her knowledge and expertise is passed on to us through that process (Participant J)

A key omission from the initial programme logic was that of the adult placement. Perhaps the most marked shift from conventional courses is that Frontline focused upon child protection social work yet in order to meet Health and Care Professions Council requirements (now transferred to Social Work England), necessary for social work registration, a 30-day adult placement was added to the model. As a late addition to the programme, the quality of this resource differed across local authorities and was dependent upon the provider. Whilst there were several participants whose placement allowed the integration of meaningful work with adults into their working day, this was the exception. Mixed findings emerged in relation to the value placed upon the adult placement,

I wasn't interested in adult stuff and it just felt like I have so much on at children's that it was frustrating having to do that [adult placement] stuff (Participant F).

I was in a place for domestic violence, but it was a multi-agency environment and I think I learnt a lot, not just about domestic violence but about housing, about the prison and the probation services and yes, just for me it was, I was really pleased with my [placement] (Participant G)

Learning was dependent upon the specific placement and the extent to which participants were willing and able to become involved in practice. By cohort two, several CSWs had employed strategies to enhance the quality of the adult placement, such as increased dialogue with existing placements or seeking alternative placement opportunities.

Participants' reaction

Interview findings supported the three main phases of learning; theory-driven, practice-driven and integration. At T1, participants began the residential course with the expectation that training would be skill-based,

I thought I would come out with a lot more understanding of the processes involved in social work, the families that you come across and the problems that they would normally face and how social work is done (Participant H)

This may be in part be due to the way Frontline was marketed; as an employment-based truncated route into social work. This has fuelled suspicion that programme content is largely based upon practical skills rather than knowledge-based social work (Cartney, 2017). Hence, participants expressed surprise at the theoretical content and research required,

I didn't see how integral they [systemic practice and motivational interviewing] were to the programme actually and that was fine, but I think that was kind of an element that surprised me (Participant L)

With limited previous experience of social work, some participants found initial teaching rather abstract. Hence, participants valued hearing from presenters who had recently been in practice as well as those with lived experience.

The change process was also facilitated by the bespoke curriculum which was designed to support the consolidation of learning across all the inputs. However, the academic demands in T1 limited delivery of bespoke tuition. By cohort two this training input had become more standardised to ensure teaching consistency across units and the linking of teaching to assignments (AT2). Finally, by T3 the focus was on integrating theory and research with practice, where participants applied what they had been taught to meet the needs of their families,

they're quite good at linking theory to practice. I think they actively go and research and take home how I'm going to work with this family this way and really prepare (CSW2)

Whilst participants on mainstream courses engage in a similar learning process, Frontline's model seeks to align theory with practice in an ongoing continuous learning cycle throughout the programme. Interviewees were unanimous in the view that there were no substantial omissions in either the academic work or experience, however differences emerged in types of experience encountered. Specific omissions from teaching content mentioned by interviewees included disclosures, direct work with teenagers and interventions with foster children.

Mediating factors

The traditional separation between 'academic' and 'practice' based aspects of social worker education mediates the tension between placement learning and enculturation into professional biases and prejudices. For Frontline, the participant unit mediated learning by providing critical distance from existing practices and practice contexts. However, the presence of a segregated unit within the team, which "cherry-picked cases" (social worker interview) and had a lower caseload than newly qualified social workers restricted the extent to which participants were embedded within social work teams. Such segregation was more distinct in local authorities that had not adopted systemic practice. At T1, this led to participant reluctance to access the wider team,

I think that the participants don't yet get the fuller picture, the holistic picture of social work so it doesn't occur to them to ask some of the more straightforward questions and I don't think they think that the wider team can support them with their systemic questions (CSW 3)

Several participants commented on how “protected” participants were from the realities of social work and from the opportunities to access informal learning opportunities and the “day-to-day stuff” (interview with Participant A) which is omitted from the training model. To address segregation, CSWs and academic tutors adopted several practical and structural strategies, such as physically locating participants within the team. Given that comparative analysis revealed that Frontline participants tended to be younger, less ethnically diverse and more socially advantaged than participants on conventional courses (Maxwell et al., 2018), such integration was particularly pertinent to give participants,

the opportunity to work with different people and experience different styles of social work which I think has been really helpful in kind of building relationships between Frontline and social workers, and also obviously to help us develop and looking at different kind of ways of practising (Participant E).

According to social workers in the wider team, integration was also deemed crucial as regardless of training model, once qualified participants would need to work within these wider teams,

I think they’ve moved from being the unit, and being quite separate, and their identity being at Frontline, to their identity being within the LA, and potentially in the team (CSW 3)

Within this process, CSWs were crucial in managing the interface between the unit and the wider team, ensuring that participants used the wider team to further their learning but also contributed to the team as future colleagues. In this respect, the wider team emerged as an unanticipated input.

Participants' Learning

Assessment of participant learning was captured using a simulated exercise reported elsewhere (see Scourfield et al., 2019). While this comparative analysis demonstrated stronger interviewing and reflection skills than students on mainstream courses, it was unclear the extent to which these results were influenced by the higher prior academic achievements of Frontline participants.

Interview analysis reiterated the strengths of Frontline participants (target audience) in deconstructing theory and translating it into practice and the role of academic tutors and CSWs in providing feedback for reflection and self-awareness. However, mixed findings emerged in relation to how confident participants were in transferring taught knowledge and skills to practice. Participants reported wanting more practice experience on which to consolidate learning,

I understand the principles but I find it quite hard to use that and to know when to use it, and I think quite often I just don't, because I'm not sure when it's appropriate and how to put it into practice ... I need a bit more on how to actually practise that with a service user (Participant P)

Conversely, CSWs deemed participants ready for practice. This follows Cameron et al. (2016), who noted a discrepancy in the levels of confidence reported in interviews by participants and the confidence in their actual performance in practice scenarios.

Moderating factors

While it was envisaged that engagement would be moderated by capacity to manage the number and emotionality of cases, this was situated more broadly within the protective nature of the participant unit. Such protection strongly influenced programme outcomes as CSWs supported individualised participant learning plans, assigning

appropriate cases and providing one-to-one support either through co-work or feedback.

In doing so, participants were able to develop their skills at their own pace,

the pace of work's slower which means there's more thoughtful work and more purposeful work going on (CSW 3)

Whilst beneficial for learners, the slower pace and assessment requirements created tension between the needs of families and the needs of the training model. This was most notable at T1, with participants making frequent family visits to aid assignment completion and the development of practice skills,

they've been doing a lot more visits to families but actually the families haven't necessarily required them (CSW2)

As the number of assignments subsided the need to engage families for observations decreased. As the year progressed, CSWs assigned more complex cases and increased participant autonomy. By T3 the focus was on ensuring participants were ready to make the transition into their first assessed and supported year (AYSE) in practice.

Training was also moderated by individual learner characteristics. Specifically, individual differences emerged in how participants experienced different programme elements. For example, some participants found having difficult conversations with service users or listening to difficult service user stories as challenging while others reported frustration with the system,

I think it's been a lot more frustration at the system and not being able to progress things and frustration at other agencies not doing things (Participant O)

Again, the unit emerged as the primary vehicle for managing these challenges. By T3, several participants expressed concern as to whether this support would be maintained

once in practice and away from the unit. Indeed, Frontline graduates have reported this to be a disadvantage of the training model,

the shock of shifting from the supportive context of working in a small cohesive team backed up by the consultant social worker to the reality of working alone in a system that can be, in some instances, unsupportive and hostile to the practice approach that Frontline advocates (Dartington Social Research Unit, 2017:43)

While the logic model included organisational context within knowledge and skills, these findings highlighted a need for further development in the extent to which participants were equipped for the reduction in support once qualified.

Outcomes

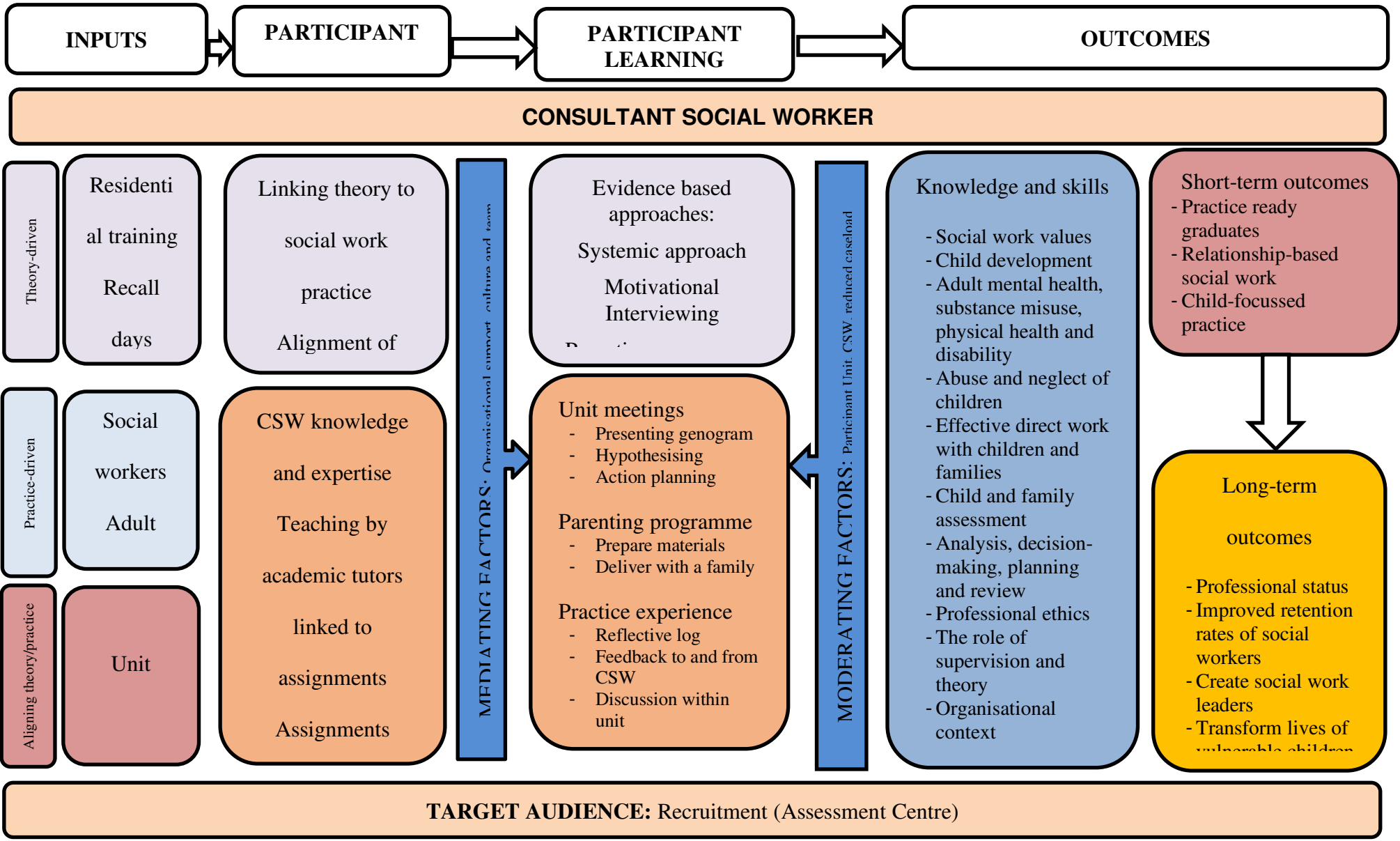
Based on the findings presented, the proposed outcomes in the programme logic were refined (figure two). An interaction was found between the recruitment of high-calibre graduates and knowledge and skill acquisition. From an initial pool of around 2000 applicants, only one in twenty obtained a place on the pilot phase. This yielded a highly selected target audience who were screened as having the qualities deemed necessary for social work (MacAlister et al., 2012). This rendered it difficult to disaggregate prior knowledge and skills from those provided by the training model.

Most participants reported having improved their ability to engage service users due to the extensive practical experience within the training model. This was supported by adult placement mentors and CSWs,

They can build very good relationships with people because of the systemic stuff. So that's one of their key strengths, it's commented on a lot by professionals and by families that they feel listened to, they feel incorporated (CSW 1)

As noted, participants varied in the types of experience they obtained during training. Differences in the nature and quality of adult placements limited training on adult

Figure two: Frontline programme logic



mental health, substance misuse, domestic violence and physical ill-health and disability. Several participants thought that teaching on legal processing and court work had been omitted from the training model.

Discussion

Programme logic added value to the evaluation as it facilitated the identification of key components and their relationships (Cooksy et al., 2001). The inter-relation between recruiting high-calibre participants and the training inputs, participant learning and knowledge and skills was identified. Findings tentatively supported the premise that high-calibre participants possessed good reasoning and analysis skills for social work although it was difficult to disaggregate existing skills from new knowledge acquisition. There was evidence that rather than absorbing theory and research, participants deconstructed approaches in order to focus on the aspects most appropriate to families and deliverable within social work timeframes. It is this interrogation and critical analysis of knowledge that has been identified as crucial to decision making within the uncertain conditions of social work practice (Taylor & White, 2006). It is also one of the main criticisms of the Frontline model, that participants are not afforded enough time to reflect and absorb teaching (Thoburn, 2017).

The quality of training inputs was dependent upon trainer expertise across all teaching inputs. The CSW emerged as a critical component of the model, where their knowledge and expertise was paramount to the development of practice skills. The academic tutor role is crucial in aligning academic teaching with practice experiences enabling learners to operationalise the concepts they have been taught (Domakin, 2015). The unit mediated knowledge acquisition, facilitating the relationship between theory and research, learning transfer and development of practice skills, and enabled participants to reflect upon their practice. This process provided participants with the

reflective space to consider their practice within the wider theoretical context without exposing families to further “experimentation in placement” (Lefevre, 2015:208). This meant that learning was not limited to individual caseload but shared across participants with the unit becoming a collaborative space for knowledge creation, shared responsibility, discussion, reflection, planning and decision making (Forrester et al., 2013; Nonaka & Konno, 1998). Conversely, the unit also limited opportunities for informal learning from the wider team. This led to variation in the extent to which participants familiarised themselves with the culture, shared values, knowledge and skills of the team which extend to the understanding of the emotional nature of the work and its impact on the self (Gray et al., 2008). For those participants who did access the wider team, it was acknowledged that this broadened participant learning to include other theories and styles of working. Hence, the wider team emerged as an unanticipated training input.

A further unanticipated input was that of the cases encountered. The dynamic nature of social work meant that participants varied in the types of cases and experiences they experienced. Whilst such inconsistencies are found on conventional courses this is particularly pertinent as according to its initial briefing document (MacAlister et al., 2012), Frontline was developed to streamline social work standards and competencies and improve consistency in social work education. It is worth noting that participants reported confidence in the areas they had experienced but less confidence in new areas. The adult placement is one such omission as well as teaching on legal processing and court work, reiterating limitations reported by participants from conventional courses (Bates et al., 2010). Conversely, communication skills emerged as a particular strength. This is perhaps not surprising as the structure of the training model is geared towards increased engagement with families through assessed observations,

the parenting programme and developing systemic practice. This appears to support the inclusion of specific theoretical evidence-based approaches. Such findings appear to counter warnings that offering a specialist child and family social work qualification would lead to a system aimed at risk-focused practice rather than prevention and empowering service users (Featherstone et al., 2014).

The evaluation design did not lend itself to determining whether the training model led to the proposed outcomes. Without these findings the calls for evidence on the impact of the training model on social work practice cannot be addressed (BASW, 2018). However, interim findings from a longitudinal study of fast track programmes (Scourfield et al., 2020) found that three years after obtaining their licence to practise, 36% of Frontline graduates had progressed to at least senior social work level positions, yet only 25% of the cohort remained in their original host authority and 29% had left statutory social work in England. Comparable rates for non-fast-track social workers are not currently available. Regarding the effect on the social work workforce, a paradox emerges. Frontline was aimed at improving the integration of theory and practice and inclusion of evidence-based approaches. However, monies awarded to Frontline have been to the detriment of funding for university-based routes which have also seen declining numbers of applicants as more participants are attracted to funded routes (Thoburn, 2017). The potential decline of social work from universities is significant, as without university social work departments the development of social work theory and research is at risk (Ferguson, 2016).

The creation and development of programme logic enabled the identification of key components, consideration of how they inter-related and aided designation of appropriate data collection methods, including both quantitative and qualitative methods, for each component, thus enabling the triangulation of data across different

methods or sources (Cooksy et al., 2001; Pawson, 2013). Further, mapping programme theory enabled the identification of gaps in the programme's logic as well as ongoing information as to how the programme evolved in practice (Ebenso et al., 2018).

References

- Maxwell, N., Scourfield, J., Zhang, M., De Villiers, T., Hadfield, M., Kinnersley, P., Metcalf, E., Pithouse, A. and Tayyaba, S. (2016). *Independent evaluation of the Frontline pilot: Research report*. Project Report. [Online]. London: Department for Education.
- Maxwell, N., Scourfield, J., de Villiers, T., Pithouse, A. and Zhang, M.L. (2018) The Pre-Training Characteristics of Frontline Participants and Mainstream Social Work Students, *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(2), 487 – 504.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx042>
- Bates, N., Immins, T., Parker, J., Keen, S., Rutter, L., Brown, K. & Zsigo, S. (2010). 'Baptism of fire': The first year in the life of a newly qualified social worker. *Social Work Education*, 29(2), 152-170.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470902856697>
- Cooksy, L.J., Gill, P. & Kelly, P.A. (2001). The program logic model as an integrative framework for a multimethod evaluation. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 24, 119-128. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189\(01\)00003-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189(01)00003-9)
- Coryn, C., Noakes, L.A., Westine, C.D. & Schröter, D.C. (2010), A systematic review of theory-driven evaluation practice from 1990 to 2009. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 32(1), 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214010389321>
- Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2014) *Re-visioning social work education: An independent review*. London: Department of Health.

- Cross, S., Hubbard, A. & Munro, E, (2010) *Reclaiming Social Work London Borough of Hackney Children and Young People's Services*. London: Human Reliability Associates and London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Cutmore, M. & Roger, J. (2016) *Comparing the costs of social work qualification routes*, York Consulting, Department for Education, Reference: DFE-RR517
- Dartington Social Research Unit. (2017). *Frontline social work training: An evaluation*. Dartington: DSRU.
- Department for Education (2014) *Re-thinking children's social work* (Reference. DFE-00380-2014).
- Department for Education. (2016). *Putting children first: Delivering our vision for excellent children's social care* (Reference. DFE-00158-2016).
- Domakin, A. (2015) The Importance of Practice Learning in Social Work: Do We Practice What We Preach?, *Social Work Education*, 34(4), 399-413.
- Domakin, A. & Curry, L. (2018). Partners in practice: Developing integrated learning opportunities on the Frontline child and family social work qualifying programme. *Child & Family Social Work*, 23, 171–179.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12396>
- Ebenso B., Uzochukwu, B., Manzano, A., Etiaba, E., Huss, R., Ensor, T., Newell, J., Onwujekwe, O., Ezumah, N., Hicks, J. & Mirzoev, T. (2018). Dealing with context in logic model development: Reflections from a realist evaluation of a community health worker programme in Nigeria. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2018.12.002>.
- Featherstone, B., Morris, K. & White, S. (2014). A marriage made in hell: Early intervention meets child protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1735–49. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct052>

- Ferguson, H. (2016) Without university social work departments, the profession cannot survive. *Community Care*,
<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/04/06/without-university-social-work-departments-profession-survive/>
- Forrester, D., Westlake, D., McCann, M., Thurnham, A., Shefer, G., Glynn, G., & Killian, M. (2013). *Reclaiming Social Work? An evaluation of systemic units as an approach to delivering children's services*. Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care, University of Bedfordshire.
- Frontline Academy (2014). *Frontline Cohort One Programme Handbook: 2014-15*, London.
- Gray, I., Parker, J. and Immins, T. (2008). Leading communities of practice in social work. *Groupwork*, 18(2), 26-40. <https://doi.org/10.1921/gpwk.v18i2.642>
- Guskey, T. R. (2000) *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Higgins, M., Poppo, M. & Crichton, N. (2014). The Dilemmas of Contemporary Social Work: A Case Study of the Social Work Degree in England. *British Journal of Social Work*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu142>
- Kellogg Foundation (2004). *Logic Model Development Guide*.
<http://www.smartgivers.org/uploads/logicmodelguidepdf.pdf>
- Kirkpatrick, D. L. (1994) *Evaluating Training Programs: The four levels*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Lai, A.Y., Steward, S.M., Mui, M.W., Wan, A., Yew, C., Lam, T.H. & Chan, S.S. (2017). An Evaluation of a Train-the-Trainer Workshop for Social Service Workers to Develop Community-Based Family Interventions. *Public Health*, 5(141), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2017.00141>

- Lefevre, M. (2015). Becoming effective communicators with children: developing practitioner capability through social work education. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45, 204–224. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct109>
- MacAlister, J., Crehan, L. & Olsen, A. (2012). *Front line: Improving the children's social work profession*. Institute for Public Policy Research, London.
http://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2013/03/frontline-childrens-social-work_Oct2012_9705.pdf?noredirect=1
- McLaughlin, J. A. & Jordan, G. B. (1999). Logic models: A tool for telling your program's performance story. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 22, 65-72.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189\(98\)00042-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0149-7189(98)00042-1)
- McNicoll, A. (2017) Frontline to curb university influence on fast-track social work curriculum. *Community Care*,
<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/02/17/frontline-curb-university-influence-fast-track-social-work-curriculum/>
- Manzano, A. & Pawson, R. (2014). Evaluating deceased organ donation: a programme theory approach. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 28(3), 366-385. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHOM-07-2012-0131>
- Morgan-Trimmer, S. (2015). Improving process evaluations of health behavior interventions: learning from the social sciences. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 3(38), 295-314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163278713497363>
- Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection. Final Report. A Child-Centred System*. London: Department for Education.
- Murphy, T (2016) The Frontline programme: conservative ideology and the creation of a social work officer class, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 4(2), 279–87.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204986016X14651166264354>

- Narey, M. (2014) *Making the education of social workers consistently effective: Report of Sir Martin Narey's independent review of the education of children's social workers*, London: Department for Education.
- Nonaka, I. & Konno, N. (1998) The Concept of 'Ba': building a foundation for knowledge creation. *California Management Review*, 40(30), 40-54.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/41165942>
- Scourfield, J., Maxwell, N., Zhang, M.L., de Viliers, T., Pithouse, A., Kinnersley, P., Metcalf, W. & Tayyaba, S. (2019). Evaluation of a Fast-Track Postgraduate Social Work Program in England Using Simulated Practice. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 29(4), 363-374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517735575>
- Scourfield, J., Maxwell, N., Venn, L., Carpenter, J., Stepanova, E. and Smith, R. (2020). *Social work fast track programmes: tracking retention and progression: interim report*. London: Department for Education.
- Social Work Task Force (2009), *Building a safe, confident future – The final report of the Social Work Task Force*. Department for Education: London.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. & White, S. (2006). Knowledge and Reasoning in Social Work: Educating for Humane Judgement. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 36(6), 937–954. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch365>
- Thoburn, J. (2017). In defence of a university social work education. *Journal of Children's Services*, 12(2-3), 97-106. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-03-2017-0006>
- Turner, A. (2020). *Frontline says it must improve on race in response to critical feedback from participants*.

<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/06/26/frontline-says-must-improve-race-response-critical-feedback-participants/>

UK Government (2019). Funding announced to train 900 new children's social workers,

[https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-announced-to-train-900-new-childrens-social-workers.](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-announced-to-train-900-new-childrens-social-workers)