A critical reflection of student mental wellbeing on the journey towards Social Work qualification

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ABSTRACT

Student mental health has been an increasing area of focus within Higher Education (HE) research since 2010, with a number of studies across a range of countries taking place (Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020). Evidence suggests rising mental health difficulties amongst HE students (Thorley, 2017), and, for the first time, McCloud et al. (2023) found in a study of several thousand participants that common mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety were slightly higher amongst HE students aged 18-19 than non-students. The mental wellbeing of students therefore presents a challenging issue for all Universities to respond to and there is increasing scrutiny around how the sector can best support the wellbeing of their students. This critical reflection uses a practitioner research methodology to initially consider what themes are evident from the literature relating to the mental wellbeing of students in HE generally and then more specifically Social Work students, before exploring the author's own experiences related to teaching and mental wellbeing. The author then proposes a number of changes to teaching practice based on this critical reflection followed by an evaluation of the changes made. Whilst the methodology of this research is self-reflective, subjective and focused upon teaching Social Work students, the findings could also be utilised by other academics more broadly within HE.

Keywords: mental wellbeing, mental health, practitioner research, social work students, critical reflection.

Introduction

You can't remake the world

Without remaking yourself.

Each new era begins within.

It Is an inward event,

With unsuspected possibilities

For inner liberation.

We could use it to turn on

Our inward lights.

We could use it to use even the dark

And negative things positively.

We could use the new era

To clean our eyes,

To see the world differently,

See ourselves more clearly.

Okri (2022, pp.73-4)

The journey to becoming a qualified Social Worker is an emotionally challenging experience (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). It involves reflecting upon past and current experiences and becoming more aware of ourselves and the society around us. I believe this journey involves remaking ourselves and how we see the world around us and that these changes can impact mental wellbeing. Students within higher education (HE) are currently experiencing an increase in mental health problems (Campbell, F. et al., 2022). In 2023, a survey of 12,796 students within HE in the UK highlighted that half of the respondents had worries about their mental health daily or weekly, with 28% of students experiencing mental health challenges at the time of the survey (Cibyl, 2023). In respect to Social Work students, there is some evidence that they are more likely to have experienced trauma prior to their training than other academic disciplines (Thomas, 2016), which can be a factor impacting student mental health (Campbell F., et al., 2022). This may place these students at risk of developing mental health difficulties during their training.

This critical reflection will focus on my teaching practice as I seek to better support student mental wellbeing in my role as a Practice Tutor on a Masters (MA) in Social Work course. Through using a practitioner research methodology and Pollard's model (2018) of reflective teaching to underpin this critical reflection, I will first outline the practice puzzle that led to this study. I will then highlight any themes from the literature around student mental wellbeing in an HE context, before thinking about critical reflection within Social Work education and applying a critical lens to my own experiences using an autoethnographic approach. I will then create an action plan based on this reflection to change how I work with students around their mental wellbeing. Finally, I will analyse and evaluate the impact of these changes. Whilst this critical reflection is focused on my teaching practice, I also aim to highlight learning that could be beneficial to other academics within an HE context.

Practice Puzzle

In the past few years, I have worked with some students on an MA in Social Work course who have left their training due to developing mental health difficulties. This has happened at different stages in the programme, but has been more evident in the earlier stages of the training programme when students transition into their practice placements. This transitional period therefore appears to be an important area to explore further in terms of my teaching practice and the potential changes I could make. The findings of a study into Social Work students found the role of the university tutor to be critical in mitigating stress, especially in terms of tutorial support and placement visits (Collins et al., 2010). However, the impact of neoliberalism within higher education has arguably left academics with less time to focus on student wellbeing with a greater focus on producing research (Lynch, 2014 cited in Tett et al., 2017). There are also greater financial pressures and targets for academics to meet. The tension between my espoused values of trying to ensure an inclusive and supportive learning environment and what is achievable in reality is therefore a key dilemma of this critical reflection (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018).

This practice puzzle is the starting point for a critical reflection which will use a practitioner research methodology (Lunt & Shaw, 2017) to answer the following research question: how can I better support student mental wellbeing through making changes to my teaching practice?

Methodology

The methodological approach used in this research is a practitioner research methodology that incorporates features of analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). Practitioner research can be defined as an inclusive approach to research with a strong focus on social justice (SPRING, 2009) and has been used by different professions within health, social care and education (Lunt & Shaw, 2017). This approach involves taking a curious and critically reflective stance in relation to practice with the aim of trying to find new approaches in relation to these experiences (SPRING, 2009). I will also use elements of analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) in this methodology. This will include using analytic reflexivity to examine my own actions and perceptions related to mental wellbeing and developing theory from this reflexivity (Anderson, 2006). This research will also use a first-person narrative writing style as a way to show visibility of self and to reflect that I am both a practitioner and researcher when conducting this research. This is also consistent with an analytic autoethnography approach (Anderson, 2006).

From an epistemological standpoint, this methodology is framed within a social constructionist view of the world, where knowledge is generated by the subjective and interpersonal experiences of the practitioner and researcher and this subjective knowledge is viewed as an important form of information (Bell, 2017). Such approaches enable practitioners to critically reflect on and develop their own practice to address specific practice-based problems (or puzzles), with the aim of mobilising the knowledge gained into action (Levin, 2013). As my research question is about my own practice, this approach will enable me to critically explore what values, thoughts and behaviours may be impacting on the students I work with. This research will also follow Pollard's (2018) model of reflective teaching as a framework for reflecting on my experiences and for creating changes to my practice. Pollard (2018) views this reflective process as cyclical or like a spiral in which teachers continually reflect on, evaluate and revise their practice.

Figure 1 Pollard's model of reflective teaching (Pollard, 2018)

I will initially *reflect* on wider themes from the literature in order to incorporate diverse perspectives beyond the self (Anderson, 2006) before undertaking a critical reflection of my own values, thoughts and behaviours related to mental wellbeing. I will then *plan* and *make provision* to *act* through making changes to my teaching practice followed by *collecting evidence* about my experiences before *analysing* and *evaluating* the changes made. This will also be approached with the underlying principles of Pollard's (2018) model in mind through being evidence informed, open-minded as well as focused on aims and consequences.

The literature review will form the first part of my critical reflection through examining mental wellbeing in both HE students generally, and Social Work students specifically, before considering the concept of resilience. The literature review was a scoping review (Bell, 2017), to establish broad themes around student experience of mental wellbeing, but also focused on any studies relating to Social Work students that suggest potential ways to improve teaching practice. When undertaking this scoping review, the theme of resilience was found within the research on Social Work students, so the literature review was expanded to also consider this concept. Searches were undertaken using a university search engine. Terms searched for were 'mental health higher education', 'mental wellbeing higher education', 'mental health social work students', 'mental wellbeing social work students' and 'resilience social work students.' Only studies completed since 2010 were included to ensure that current themes are highlighted and because since 2010 there has been a greater focus upon student mental health in HE research (Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020).

The reason for focusing broadly on mental wellbeing is because I want to create an inclusive learning environment for all students and to maximise better outcomes for all learners (Ashwin et al., 2020). Historically, the response to student mental health by universities has been reactive and I want to create a stronger narrative of care between myself and my students (Tett et al., 2017). I am therefore seeking to align my teaching practice more closely with my values, but also with the aim that students will feel better supported during their training related to their mental wellbeing. Mental health is defined as a broad spectrum which includes both positive mental health through to mental illness (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) and in this paper I define the term mental wellbeing as, "the ability to cope with the day-to-day stresses of life, work proactively, interact positively with others and realise our own potential" (Mind, 2023, p5). I will refer to people experiencing mental health difficulties, or mental health issues as someone who may experience a longer-term impact upon their day-to-day lives due to their mental health, which may include a diagnosis (Mind, 2023).

Ethical approval was not sought for this research as it involved a literature review and reflecting on my experiences, rather than directly involving any students in the research design. No data was therefore collected from students in relation to their experiences. In addition, no individual students are discussed and no information is included that could identify any student. I am aware that undertaking this research involved focusing on my experiences which could have an impact on me personally. To mitigate this, I accessed psychodynamic clinical supervision during the writing of this article which enabled me to process and think through any emotional experiences I encountered. This research has also been undertaken independently of my employer and any views expressed are purely my own.

Practitioner research has a number of limitations which will impact upon the generalisability, validity and reliability of the research. I do not claim that any findings made will be generalisable. The role of being both a practitioner and a researcher is an inevitable part of this research approach and I cannot separate these roles, which may risk this methodology being "research light" (Uggerhoj & Anderson, 2024, p4). However, I

hope to mitigate this through using principles from analytic autoethnography in being conscious of this dichotomy and self-reflexive about how this has shaped the research (Anderson, 2006).

There are also a number of different methodological approaches that fall under the umbrella of practitioner research (Fox et al., 2007) with there being no consistent methodology. Conversely this is also a strength of practitioner research because it is fluid and adaptable to different situations (Fox et al., 2007) and it will enable a deep dive into my own practice. Evaluating the changes to my practice will also be based only on my own reflections and therefore this will be shaped by my own perspectives and biases. However, through creating the space for a critical examination of my own practice this will also be of potential benefit to myself and also the students I work with (Lunt & Shaw, 2017). The literature review is small scale and does not cover all literature relating to the mental health and wellbeing of students, which may also limit the overall findings. Although the conclusions drawn will be limited more to my own practice, I aim to make the findings relatable to other academics and students in HE.

Reflect - Literature review

The greater focus on student mental health within the HE sector has led to initiatives such as the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) and Stepchange: Mentally Health Universities (UUK, 2017). This is not only due to the requirements upon universities to meet their commitments under the UK Equality Act (2010), but also out of a concern about the rising numbers of students experiencing mental health problems. In a survey of over 12,000 HE students in the UK in 2022, students reported rising mental health difficulties with 81% reporting mental health challenges compared to 60% of respondents in 2021 (Cibyl, 2022). Although the number of students reporting current mental health difficulties in the UK has fallen from 35% in 2021, to 33% in 2022, to 29% of students in 2023 (Cibyl, 2023) this still equates to a significant number of students experiencing mental health difficulties. Campbell F., et al. (2022) in their systematic review of 31 studies found that depression and anxiety are prevalent amongst university students and there are increasing concerns about self-harm and suicide. In one UK study of 10,000 HE students, almost a quarter of students reported feeling lonely most of the time (Neves & Brown, 2022, cited in Barnett, 2022). Student mental health is therefore a relevant issue to all staff and every HE institution.

In terms of which students may be more vulnerable, Campbell F., et al. (2022) found that students who have experienced trauma in childhood, students who identify as LGBTQ+ and those with autism were more likely to experience mental health difficulties. In a UK survey of 12,796 students (Cibyl, 2023), the groups most vulnerable to experiencing mental health difficulties were LGBTQ+ respondents, those who identified as white, students from a low socio-economic background and women. Other factors which impact upon mental health include loneliness, social isolation and past mental health difficulties (Campbell F., et al., 2022). Protective factors found in the research by Campbell F., et al. (2022) include individual factors such as adaptability, resilience, grit, emotional regulation, self-esteem and body image. It is also important to note that the impact of microaggressions on marginalised groups may also be important to consider. For example, the impact of racism or racist microaggressions within HE is likely to impact significantly on the mental wellbeing of racialised minority students (Brown et al., 2019).

Given that some students from marginalised groups are self-reporting higher mental health difficulties than others, this suggests the importance of taking an intersectional approach to understanding and responding to this issue (Crenshaw, 1991). Such an approach considers the different intersections of experience and identity that could impact on student mental wellbeing, which also includes the long-term impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic (Mind, 2023). This also suggests all staff within HE need to identify and support those students who may be more likely to experience mental health difficulties as a form of early intervention.

However, focusing more on the emotional side of education has been criticised by Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) as part of what they consider to be an unchallenged assumption about an epidemic of mental health difficulties in society. This approach to education, in their view, leads to a lowering of educational and social aspirations amongst students as well as feeding a dependence on forms of emotional support offered by the state (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). However, as indicated above, students are self-reporting an increase in mental health difficulties and this emphasises the importance of considering their emotional experiences of HE. Goleman (2020) argues that the emotional side of education is crucial in the development of students both academically and personally. Developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management not only underpins academic success but also professional and personal success (Goleman, 2020) and could be areas to focus upon further within Social Work education.

In relation to Social Work students, Thomas (2016) found, in a survey of 79 MSW students in the USA, that 42% had experienced four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences, which was 2.5 times more likely to be the case than someone in the general California population. Kinman and Grant (2011), in a survey of 240 Social Work students in the UK, found 43% of Social Work students potentially needed support due to psychological distress. Although trauma can lead to personal growth (Thomas, 2016), it can also impact mental health (Filer, 2019) and it is a known factor impacting on university students' mental health (Campbell F., et al., 2022). There are, however, also studies which show a different experience. Campbell J., et al., (2022) found in their study of 240 Irish Social Work students in Ireland, that the respondents were generally more positive about their mental health. Due to a limited number of studies, it is therefore unclear to what extent Social Work students experience mental health difficulties and whether this is different across countries or higher than other HE students.

Jung's concept of the wounded healer may be an important concept to explain the potentially higher prevalence of past trauma within Social Work students (Jung, 1961, cited in Newcomb et al., 2015). Jung defined the wounded healer as someone who may be drawn into working with traumatised people after experiencing trauma themselves (Jung, 1961, cited in Newcomb et al., 2015). Wounded healers may have high levels of empathy, but may also transfer their own needs onto the people they work with or be at risk of burnout (Newcomb et al., 2015). This indicates a need for a trauma informed approach to Social Work education as the taught content may cause vicarious trauma or re-traumatise students (Carello & Butler, 2015). Suggestions to address this include warnings about any difficult taught content, checking in with students and following up with them after taught sessions, modelling self-reflection and personal care and allowing students not to participate in sessions if they wish (Carello & Butler, 2015). This could also be relevant to other professional training courses across HE.

Whilst it is important to try and minimise stress and trauma to Social Work students, it is also unrealistic to fully protect students from the difficult emotional demands of practice and learning. Barnett (2022, abstract) refers to higher education as a place where students experience a sense of homelessness, where they are "epistemologically unsettled" and begin a lifelong journey of "self-unsettlement". Anxiety is a necessary part of this process, as students have to give up what they know and remake their understanding of themselves and the world. However, this should also be experienced within an emotionally containing learning process so that the student is not overwhelmed (Baird, 2016).

Developing resilience to counter the emotional demands of Social Work training has been focused upon by some Social Work academics and this could also be relevant to other students across HE. Beddoe et al.

(2013) define resilience as the experience of adverse experiences and the capacity to use positive skills to overcome this. Whilst an individual can learn to become more resilient, this will also be influenced by other factors such as the organisations which Social Work students are placed within (Grant & Kinman, 2020).

Kinman and Grant (2011) found that Social Work students with higher levels of capacity for reflection, emotional intelligence, empathy and social competence were more likely to be resilient to stress. Reflection, in particular around their feelings and thoughts and being able to consider those of others, also supported better communication skills (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Empathetic concern, developing appropriate emotional boundaries and social support were also found to help to develop resilience (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Beddoe et al. (2013) found that developing tools for Social Work students to improve professional identity that are realistic, but also hopeful, helped foster resilience. Suggestions include: considering personal attributes, improving self-care, developing awareness of the bigger picture and fostering peer support. Peer support was also found to mitigate academic stress in another study of Social Work students (Wilks & Spivey, 2010) and practising daily self-care was found to reduce academic stress for Social Work students in an additional study (O'Neill et al., 2019). Kinman and Grant (2020) have developed a guide for Social Workers to promote emotional resilience that could also be used with student Social Workers. Napoli and Bonifas (2011) suggest that developing mindfulness in the classroom for Social Work students could help develop empathy and emotional regulation leading to a better acceptance of themselves and others. This could be particularly important in the context of teaching about social justice issues (Berila, 2016). However, Berila (2016) highlights that any educator also needs to be practising these approaches to make them effective.

Given this research, it is suggested that Social Work educators need to develop an emotional curriculum (Grant et al., 2015). This would also develop Fink's (2013) concept of significant learning experiences within Social Work education, through the caring and human dimension elements of this framework. Such a focus would run through the curriculum in terms of how learning is structured, delivered and how students are assessed. However, the concept of resilience has been critiqued as being a way to further oppress marginalised groups and divert attention away from structural issues that impact on mental wellbeing such as ableism, racism, homophobia and sexism (Suslovic & Lett, 2023). Improving student mental well-being through increasing resilience should therefore be implemented in tandem with promoting social justice (Suslovic & Lett, 2023).

This focused literature review highlights that HE students are experiencing an increase in terms of their mental health needs. The reasons for this are complex, but the research suggests certain marginalised groups experience more mental health difficulties than others. This suggests an intersectional lens is important to use when thinking about how best to support HE students. In relation to Social Work students, despite some evidence that their past experience of trauma may be higher than that of other HE students, it is unclear whether this results in a higher degree of mental health difficulties amongst Social Work students when compared to other HE courses. Whilst promoting resilience is seen as a potential way to help student Social Workers manage the emotional demands of the role, caution should be applied in ensuring improving resilience is built within a framework that also tackles social justice issues.

Reflect - Critical self-reflection

Social Work training places an expectation on practitioners to use reflective practice to develop self-awareness (Howells & Bald, 2022) and it is an expected competence within the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Work (BASW, 2018). HE teachers are also expected to use critical evaluation as part of

the Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023) and within schools, self-evaluation and reflection are viewed as important for professional development for teachers (Department for Education, 2021). In healthcare, nurses are expected to use their code of practice to help inform professional reflection (Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2018) and doctors are expected to reflect on their performance, values and contributions made (General Medical Council, 2024). Reflection is therefore a key part of the standards expected across different professions.

When considering the concept of reflection, Brookfield (2009) states that reflection and critical reflection are two different concepts and it is possible to be reflective without thinking critically. Importantly, power and dominant hegemonic concepts such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy must be considered in order for critical reflection to occur (Brookfield, 2009). I would also argue this is key to being analytically reflexive (Anderson, 2006). The status quo therefore needs to be questioned as well as our personal core beliefs and assumptions (Larrivee, 2000) as we utilise our curiosity or the "urge to know" about our experiences and those of others (Stokoe, 2021, p1). This process of letting go of certainty and accepting uncertainty can create difficult emotional responses that often need the support of someone else to help navigate (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). Within Social Work, supervision can be used as a space for reflection. In a rapid review of supervision in Social Work, Ravelier et al. (2023) found a supportive and available manager, or a peer group, helped to create the right environment for reflective practice. These concepts underpinning critical reflection are also essential in developing a critical approach to pedagogy (Seal & Smith, 2021).

Without incorporating these ideas, reflective practice could become a mechanistic process where students conform to a model of how to reflect that could become oppressive and confessional in nature (Macfarlane & Gourlay, 2009). Wilson (2013) notes that some Social Work students who took part in reflective practice through supervision found this anxiety provoking and not necessarily constructive, especially when the reflection was viewed to be prescriptive and repetitive. If learning is a relational exercise between the student and the teacher (Bovill, 2020), without reflecting on this relationship and our teaching practice we will arguably never fully develop our practice wisdom or full potential as teachers (Kinsella, 2010). Change and personal transformation are an inevitable part of the learning process for both teachers and students (Marton et al., 1993, cited in Ashwin et al., 2020) and there are strong emotional components in the student- teacher relationship which have to be worked through in order to help the student grow personally and academically (Hinshelwood, 2009). The creation of a learning environment where fears around learning can be contained in an emotionally supportive environment are therefore fundamental to creating an inclusive space in which to learn (Sappington, 1984).

Critically reflecting on these ideas, I have considered my 'Social Graces' (Burnham, 2012) in relation to my teaching practice. Burnham (2012) developed the concept of the Social Graces in order to conceptualise the different aspects that make up the identity of an individual (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, disability) and that these identity markers can be visible or invisible. I am a white, neurotypical, able bodied, middle class, heterosexual male, which means I hold power and privilege as a result of my identity characteristics. To preserve this power and privilege, I may have a vested interest in societal structures remaining intact, including around how society responds to people with mental health problems. I would argue that all academics within HE should be conscious and aware of their own Social Graces and potential privilege in order to fully support students around their mental wellbeing.

In considering the students I work with, these Social Graces could also affect whether students feel comfortable discussing their mental wellbeing with me dependent on their own Social Graces and also mine. What happens in the classroom is in the context of wider societal systems and my experience of

mental health will not be the same as those I teach (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003). In a recent survey 67% of students said they would feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable discussing their mental health with an academic tutor (Petitions Committee, 2023). One possible reason could be due to worries about being judged asking for help and support. This may be even more prevalent in students from marginalised backgrounds who may fear that this could lead to further discrimination against them, especially as I am someone who represents groups who have often oppressed others.

In relation to my own experience of mental health, I did not grow up in a family where emotions and feelings were discussed and I may unconsciously avoid such discussions with students as a result of these experiences. This may impact on the way I teach students, potentially avoiding discussions around emotions or not fully realising the emotional impact upon them of training to be a Social Worker. Whilst I now place greater emphasis on considering my own and other's emotional experiences, this was not previously the case whilst training to be a Social Worker and in the early stages of my career. I would often try to manage my feelings through working harder to show competence and also to show that I could manage any situation I came across. Over time this has impacted upon my physical and mental health as well as social relationships and I now place a greater emphasis on practising self-care.

I also experienced trauma both as a child and as a Social Worker that has impacted my mental wellbeing. In both instances this was an experience of death, the death of my mother as a child and my professional experience of being involved in situations where children were killed by a parent and/or parents. This left me with difficult and complex emotional reactions that I have often tried to avoid. The use of self-disclosure about these experiences could be an important teaching tool to share power and to create a more open dialogue around mental wellbeing (hooks, 1994). However, given the nature of these experiences, it will also be important to consider how to use this in a way that is supportive of students and does not impact negatively upon them.

Thinking further about Pollard's ideas around the cyclical and spiral nature of the reflective process, I have been drawn to Jung's concept of individuation, an inward spiral journey, which leads to wholeness through the integration of the unconscious with the conscious (Stein, 2010). The path to Social Work qualification can be seen as one such spiraling inward journey, as we become more self-aware and conscious of ourselves through the training (the remaking of ourselves). The image of the spiral is one of the most widespread in the natural world, found in galaxies, whirlpools, hurricanes and shells and is used symbolically across cultures to represent growth and transformation (ARAS, 2010). The artist Remedios Varo used a spiral to depict her own journey and transformation towards inwards growth and transformation, through a journey to the centre of a spiral (Barron, 2022). Using such visual metaphors in teaching may help students to conceptualise their feelings around growth and transformation. This has already been used successfully in Social Work training, particularly in reference to thinking about oppression (Hillock, 2013) and it may be helpful to some students who use visual thinking to conceptualise experiences.

Figure 2 *The Spiral Transit*, Varo (1962)

As well as a journey being related to growth and transformation, it can also involve overcoming challenges and I was therefore drawn to Campbell's concept of the Hero's Journey (1949). This archetypal monomyth was developed through studying the journey of the hero in myths and stories across cultures (Campbell, 1949). This resonated with me both due to overcoming the challenges on the journey towards Social Work qualification, but also in my recent journey to becoming a teacher and the challenges of creating a different professional identity.

Other academics have also been drawn to this model. Goldstein (2005) used the Hero's Journey with student teachers and, whilst this helped students acknowledge their strengths and put setbacks into perspective, students found identifying with a hero problematic. Reaves (2024) used the Hero's Journey as part of autoethnographic research into her own self-care journey, drawing on creative reflection in order to explore experiences related to mental wellbeing. Taylor (2024) takes an autoethnographic approach to their doctoral-journey, using the Hero's Journey as an analytic framework to underpin their experience, which they conclude may be relevant to other HE students. O'Shea and Stone (2014) use the Hero's Journey to analyse the story of seven women who returned to education, reframing their experience as being, "successful travellers rather than individuals pummeled by forces beyond their control" (p.89). This would suggest that the concept of the Hero's Journey may have resonance for Social Work students, but also

across HE, and could be utilised further by both academics and students as a way to conceptualise their experiences.

However, I would also suggest that changes need to be made to lessen the individualistic nature of the model through incorporating a feminist perspective. This would emphasise the importance of allies and who may be needed to help navigate the different stages of the journey (Noble, 1994, cited in Goldstein, 2005). If used without considering this, then the model could lead to a reinforcement of the neoliberal idea of the responsibility of the individual, when community, social and political factors could also be equally important factors shaping experience (Bell, 2019).
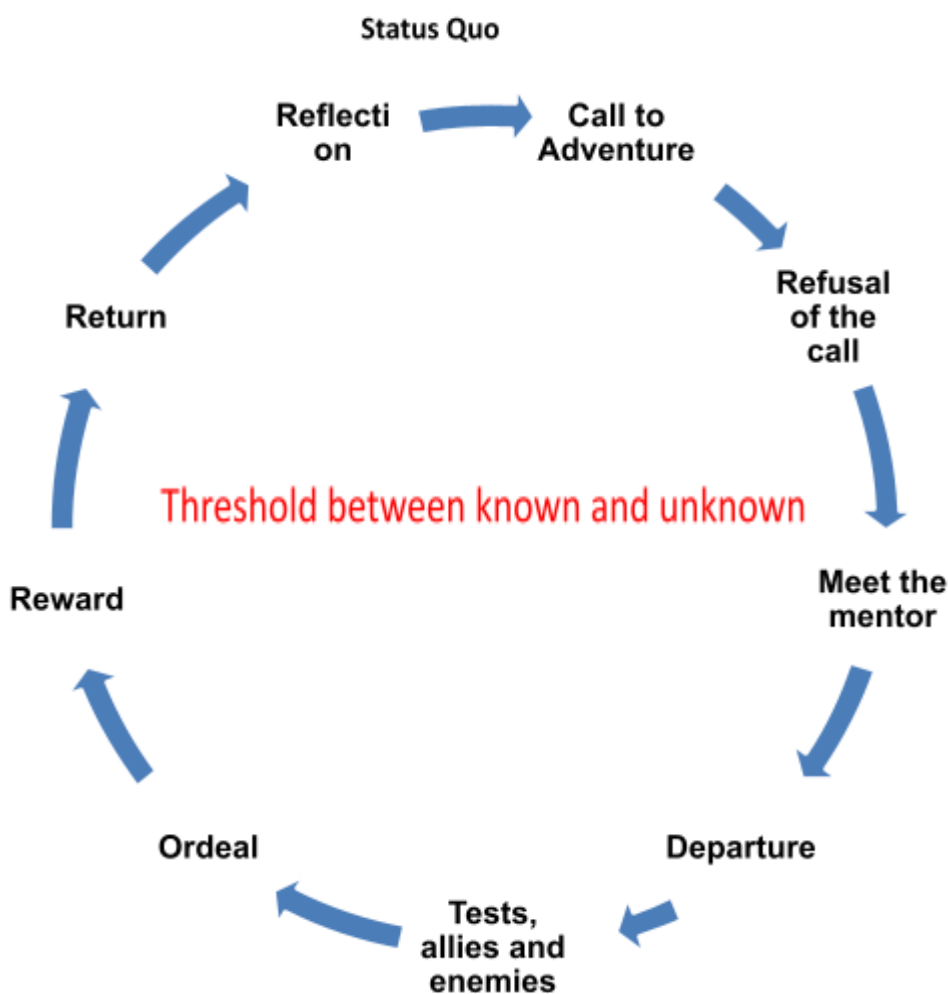

Figure 3 Campbell (1949) The Hero's Journey (author adaptation from Wilson, et al., 2022)

In relation to Social Work training the journey begins with a call to train as a Social Worker, before fears may arise about the journey ahead. There may be worries about whether the decision to train as a Social Worker is the correct one and also whether the challenges ahead can be overcome. A mentor (academic tutor and/or work-based supervisor) helps them to overcome these fears and in early meetings establishes supportive relationships with the student. The students will then depart into academic learning and

practice placements, which is where they enter the unknown aspects of their training journey. Along this journey they will face tests and ordeals in overcoming the requirements of the training and, if they succeed in overcoming these ordeals, they will develop a sense of reward before returning to reflect upon their accomplishments as they achieve Social Work qualification. As described by others (Reaves, 2024; Taylor, 2024; O'Shea & Stone, 2014) this could provide a framework for the journey of Social Work students in which to hold their experience, which could help students see setbacks within a broader frame of reference. This would then encourage them, using the thoughts of O'Shea and Stone (2014), to keep on travelling.

Plan – Make Provision – Act

To move into the Act stage of Pollard's model (2018), I have designed an action plan informed by SMART targets which are: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (Doran, 1981). The focus of each of these actions is to promote student mental wellbeing through making realistic changes to my teaching practice and pastoral care, which are based on the key ideas from the literature and my critical self-reflection. I consider that the actions could be adaptable to working with other students across different HE disciplines, particularly within the helping professions. I hope that the outcome for students will be that they experience a more inclusive learning environment and that their mental wellbeing is better supported throughout their training. The main challenge I anticipate will be the influence of other factors outside of my control such as student's personal lives, their experience of working in challenging organisational contexts and the demands of the training programme. I recognise I am one factor in a multitude of factors that might influence a student's mental wellbeing, but I aim to focus on what I can change through these actions.

Table 1 Action plan

What change am I going to make?	How will I do this?	How do I know if this change has been effective?
To support students in developing their reflective skills in order to build empathy and communication.	To create a short workshop on reflective practice, including models of reflective practice which will make links to wellbeing.	I will collect feedback from students and review their reflective writing assignments throughout their training to assess the impact of this change.
I will create teaching content that helps students conceptualise their experience through questions, poetry and images such as photographs or art.	I will develop reflective questions based on the Hero's Journey. These questions will be incorporated into existing pastoral support meetings and tutorials (Appendix A). I will also introduce images and poetry into teaching.	I will reflect on the responses I obtain from students through asking questions based on the Hero's Journey.

I will use narrative self-disclosure with students around my own wellbeing and mental health experiences.	I will create pieces of narrative self-disclosure around mental wellbeing. I will consider carefully when to use these and whether such self-disclosure will aid the student in understanding their own experiences.	I will reflect on this when I use it and see how it 'lands' with the student and what their experience of this is.
I will take a reflective and non-judgmental approach to student wellbeing.	I will apply the Social Graces (Burnham, 2012) with students around their mental wellbeing. This will include thinking about visible as well as invisible Social Graces. I will also consider these different identity markers from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991).	I will reflect on the development of the relationship formed with students and whether using the Social Graces and intersectionality theory helps broaden discussions around wellbeing.
To incorporate trauma informed teaching principles as a routine part of my teaching practice.	I will use the principles in Carello and Butler (2015) and Sappington (1984) throughout teaching practice. The aim of this will be to create a learning environment where participants can be stretched emotionally and intellectually, but not overwhelmed.	I will seek feedback from students and use peer observation to review how effective this has been.

Analysis and Evaluation

This evaluation will focus only upon my experiences as a teacher as no ethical approval was sought to include feedback from students. It is recognised that this will limit the findings of this evaluation. I will also only highlight the general themes found to avoid the identification of any student I have worked with.

The changes have been implemented over 12 months with the first change made to incorporate the questions around the Hero's Journey (Appendix A) into meetings and tutorials. In initial meetings I used questions around a student's motivation to be a Social Worker, the support available to each student and daily self-care strategies. This enabled thinking about mental wellbeing to be focused upon from the beginning of our relationship and I found this to be a useful addition to these meetings as it opened up a space to discuss mental wellbeing that previously had not always happened. I also felt more able to relate to and talk about mental wellbeing than previously, due to the critical reflection I undertook and through understanding how my Social Graces (Burnham, 2012) have shaped my experience of mental health. I have also spent more time exploring mental wellbeing with students from marginalised backgrounds due to the findings from the literature review. I continued to use the Hero's Journey questions throughout the training programme, finding this a really useful conceptual framework connected to mental wellbeing. Adapting the Hero's Journey questions (Appendix A) into other HE courses would, I believe, be possible for any academic

tutor to achieve. However, my learning also indicates that this will likely be more effective when a tutor reflects on their own experiences of mental health and how their Social Graces have shaped this.

The workshop on critical reflection has been delivered twice to two separate cohorts of students. The main benefit appears to have been in helping students develop their reflective writing at an MA level. However, it has also prompted some students to begin reflective journals, which will hopefully lead to longer term improvements in mental wellbeing.

In terms of narrative self-disclosure, I used this within the context of teaching to the wider student cohort rather than with individual students. I gave examples from my own Social Work practice that have impacted upon my mental wellbeing and how I navigated this, as well as thinking about vicarious trauma. I hope through using self-disclosure and normalising discussions around mental wellbeing that this will have created spaces for more open discussions on mental wellbeing to take place.

Whilst I have continued to use trauma informed principles of teaching, I have found that students have needed a framework to underpin discussions, especially around oppression and discrimination. The reason for this is the degree of emotional difficulties encountered when having discussions on racism, sexism, homophobia or ableism. The group discussions have sometimes mirrored wider societal debates on these issues, creating tension within the space. I have therefore introduced the Oops, Ouch, Whoa framework (Stillman, 2021) into my teaching practice. *Oops* is used when you say something and realise you misspoke or if you offended someone, *ouch* is used if someone says something and this upsets or offends you and *whoa* is used if you want to slow the conversation down to better understand what someone is trying to say (Stillman, 2021). This has helped create pause points to reflect and manage emotions within group discussions that has avoided discord between people and opened up space for reflection.

What I have also learnt from trying to implement these changes over the last 12 months, is that there are many factors out of my control as an academic tutor. Student experience of practice placements, changes or events in a student's personal life and the continued impact of structural discrimination connected to gender, race, sexuality or disability are all factors I may have limited control over. However, I can still try to control my own role within this. From my experience so far, the changes made have helped to focus on the mental wellbeing of students throughout their training journey and also enabled an internal shift in my own confidence in holding these discussions. Some students have begun to use reflective journals and narrative self-disclosure has helped to create spaces where discussions around mental wellbeing can more easily take place. Finally using the Oops, Ouch, Whoa framework has been a positive addition to help scaffold what are complex discussions related to working with people's experience of oppression and discrimination.

Conclusion

> there will be moments when
> you will bloom fully and then
> wilt, only to bloom again.
> if we can learn anything from
> flowers it is that resilience is born
> even when we feel like we are
> dying.
> Elle (2017, p52)

In my journey from Social Work practice to teaching Social Work students, I have undergone a personal transformation. Reflecting upon this has prompted me to consider the impact of personal transformation and how this might impact the wellbeing of the students I work with. The theme of the journey, represented visually as a circle, or as a spiral, as an on-going reflective process and one where resilience is needed to overcome challenges, has been a significant theme found within my personal reflections. As I conceptualise my own experiences, I have also sought to guide students through their training programme by using these ideas as a way to support their mental wellbeing. I hope to have contributed to a discussion about student mental wellbeing in HE through this research and through the suggested changes to my teaching practice. Whilst evaluating these changes has been limited to my own reflections, there are signs that the changes made have impacted positively on both myself and some students, which has therefore made this research worthwhile and impactful. This research also suggests that the changes made could be relevant and used by other academic tutors across HE.

Biography

Andrew Davies is a qualified Social Worker and a Practice Tutor for Frontline since 2022. Frontline provides Social Work training through an MA in Social Work course. He has been a qualified Social Worker since 2009 and has worked in a variety of different areas within Children and Families services.

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Appendix A - Hero's journey reflective questions

Narrative Stage	Reflective Question
Call to adventure	What influenced you in becoming a Social Worker?
Refusal of the Call	What hopes and fears do you have for your Social Work training?
Meeting the Mentor	Who are your mentors and allies and how can they best support you on the course?
Departure	What daily self-care strategies can you put into place to help you in the initial stages of the course? What about throughout the course?
Tests and ordeals	What people and/or strategies and/or resources might help you overcome tests and ordeals on your journey towards Social Work qualification?
Reward	How will you celebrate and recognise your achievements?
Reflection	When you complete the course what do you think you will be most proud of?