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The place of child observation in social work training

KATE WILSON

Summary There has been an increasing interest in the use of child observation as part of child care training for social workers. This paper argues that child observation provides a range of opportunities for learning, and illustrates these with examples from students' work on a post-qualifying, multi-disciplinary course in Child Protection. Issues concerning the structuring of child observation training are explored.

The systematic observation of infants and young children has been included as part of the training of clinical psychologists and child psychotherapists for many years. Many training courses for nursery nurses and teachers include brief observation and study of an individual child as part of the curriculum. More recently, CCETSW has supported initiatives designed to encourage the inclusion of child observation in training programmes for social workers. (See Trowell, 1991, for a fuller discussion of these.) However, given the pressure on content in qualifying courses and the relatively time consuming nature of the activity of child observation, it is arguable that a case needs to be made for its inclusion as part of the curriculum. It is therefore important to evaluate what child observation can contribute to training, and to develop from practice experience ideas concerning the most effective structures for ensuring that this learning occurs. This paper considers the principal learnings which may be derived from child observation, and explores the extent to which these were gained by social work and health visitor students on a post-qualifying course in Child Protection.

Child observation may be undertaken for different reasons, and hence require different structures to achieve these objectives. Tough (1976), for example, discusses the kinds of observations which trainee psychologists make, in order to develop skills in conducting cognitive/educational tests. Although the observer needs to develop some awareness of the reciprocal impact that she/he may have on the child and the environment, this understanding is seen as a secondary rather than a primary goal. Observations must be structured, an observational schedule is usually adopted, and observations of the same child may be confined to one or two occasions.

Clearly such a model has some relevance to the training of social workers and other care workers. A requirement, for example, to apply the Sheridan developmental checklist with a child, or to conduct a simple cognitive test, may be useful in reinforcing students' knowledge of child development, their familiarity with the material, and their ability to interpret information and assessments made by other professionals.

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However, although the development of specific knowledge about children is a legitimate objective, the central purpose of child observation for those working with children in social work or care settings concerns the learning of a range of skills, the acquisition of which requires a more complex structure.

Principal among these are the skills relating to 'stance', which I take to be an issue in all assessment and therapeutic work. By this I mean the ability to become involved and engaged in what the other person is feeling and experiencing sufficiently to be able to recognize these feelings, while at the same time retaining enough detachment to reflect on what one is observing. The capacity to be able to recognize the emotional interactions of those one is observing, to be aware of one's own emotions, and to differentiate between the two, is crucial here. Rustin (1989a) underlines, in discussing the rationale for devoting so much training time to the activity of observation (in this case infant observation), the learning which takes place from recognizing one's personal response to the observations:

In this latter category are the issues of how one finds a place for oneself in the family during visits, one's identification with different members of the family, one's response to anxiety and uncertainty and a large measure of helplessness, and one's exposure to some of one's own personal problems as a consequence of the emotional impact of the observations. (p. 8)

Second, and related to this, it provides the opportunity to practice the skill of maintaining the focus of observing the child, while at the same time maintaining some contact with the child's carers, or with other adults who are present. As Trowell, 1991, suggests, 'the course member has to be appropriately responsive and yet remained detached, to avoid being drawn in and offering advice or doing anything with, or to, the subject. Naturally, there will be moments when, in a crisis, the observer may need to respond as a citizen, but they then have to work to regain their role as an observer.' (p. 96).

The importance and indeed the difficulty of maintaining the focus on the child has been highlighted in a number of Child Abuse Inquiries, (e.g. Blom-Cooper, 1985, 1987) where it appears that the presence of their parents impaired the workers' ability to recognize the children's condition.

Third, it provides an opportunity to sharpen skills in observation. This includes learning to distinguish between observation, hypothesis and assessment; the importance of not pre-judging situations; and the readiness to modify first impressions in the light of new information. Freed, in systematic observation, from the pressure to make decisions which normally characterizes social work interventions, the observer can be given time to see what is happening, to experience the interactions between the child and his or her caregivers, and to revise first impressions in the light of new information. The expectation is—and it is one on which most social work training is based—that learning derived from work undertaken in protected 'laboratory' conditions may be generalized to more typical working situations.

The observation model

The structure for undertaking observations which will allow for the above skills to be developed must clearly be one which allows time and opportunity for these issues to be explored, in relation both to the actual observations themselves, and to the issues that are evoked for the observer. The model adopted on our course is based on one developed at the Tavistock Clinic, to the extent that, unlike those described for example by Tough, the observations take place over a number of weeks, are relatively unstructured, and place emphasis on the interplay between what is being observed and the observer's reactions to it. Infant observation was introduced at the Tavistock
initially in training courses for child psychotherapists but the model has subsequently been modified to take account of the different training needs and availability of other professionals involved in working with children. Although Trowell (1991) suggests that infant observation (i.e. of a child under twelve months) provides a more intense experience and a greater opportunity to develop the capacity to observe and record, she notes that the alternative young child observation may be 'more manageable and less disturbing to the observer'. (p. 99)

Students are asked to select a child aged between one and five, and to make arrangements to visit and observe the child for an hour over a number of weeks, either with his or her carers at home, or in a play group or nursery setting, or both, and to record their observations afterwards in as much detail as possible. The students meet in a group for an hour and a half once a week with a seminar leader to discuss the material of the observations. Students take it in turns to present 'their' child to the seminar group.

The observations are recorded from memory afterwards, experience so far suggesting that the work involved in recalling and trying to put into words feelings and communications is an important part of developing the skill of observation (See Rustin 1989b, pp. 68–70 for a fuller discussion of this and of the advantages and limitations of mechanical recording aids.) Students are encouraged to be literal and factual in their accounts, recording in as much detail as possible the child's activities, verbal and non-verbal exchanges between the child and other people present, and the feelings of participants (including the observer), so that the seminar group is able to consider the evidence from the observations before it is interpreted in more abstract, theoretical terms.

As Trowell & Miles (1990) indicate, observation sequences of varying lengths are currently being used in different training centres throughout the country. In training courses conducted by the Tavistock, observations and seminars continue over a one year, or in some cases, a two year period. While the quality and intensity of the learning experience undoubtedly increases over time, on many training programmes such as ours this investment of time is not feasible. Instead, students are asked to undertake eight weekly observations in addition to time spent with the child's carers/school in clarifying the structure and purpose of the observation.

On the basis of our experience in the first year, we now link the observations more specifically to the teaching of attachment theory. (See Bretherton 1985 for an overview of attachment theory and subsequent refinements and elaborations to it.) We have done this for two reasons. First, we wanted to emphasize the need to focus on the child in interaction with other key figures. In discussing infant observation, Rustin (1989a) makes it clear that an understanding of the impact which the interactions between infant and carer have on the development of the child's personality is an integral part of the observation:

The aim is to describe the development of the relationship between infant and others, including the observer, and to try to understand the unconscious aspects of behaviour and patterns of communication . . . Aspects of the inner world of the family members which underlie their personalities and relationships become manifest. In particular, the reaction of the infant's personality, the interaction between constitutional and temperamental factors in the baby, and the particular strengths and weaknesses of the holding environment can be considered. (p. 7–8).

In some of their initial observations, we found that students tended to focus on the child virtually to the exclusion of observing and reflecting on the interactions with carers. Attachment behaviour provides a framework for observing interaction, while retaining the focus on the child and the impact of experiences on him or her. Second, a majority of the students are regularly involved in making decisions about the quality of care and the strength of attachments between children and their birth parents or substitute carers. The difficulty of developing skills in this key
area of child protection work is evident, and the cumulative experiences of the observations provide a valuable opportunity for doing this. We therefore introduce the observation sequence with a day workshop and guided reading on attachment theory, and students are asked as part of their reflections on the observations to consider the evidence of attachment and attachment behaviour.

**Students’ learning from child observation**

The ensuing consideration of aspects of the learning derived by the students is drawn from material in the students’ narrative accounts, essays, comments in the written evaluation undertaken at the end and from discussion in the student groups. This can clearly in no sense be regarded as a systematic evaluation of the benefits or otherwise gained, and one needs to keep an open mind about the extent to which students in reflecting on their work may have responded to group pressure (the example cited below of reassessing an initial experience of boredom is a case in point). Nonetheless, the students’ experiences do I think provide a valid source of illustration and evidence.

The powerful impact which the observations had on the students took many of them by surprise. As one of them wrote in the anonymous evaluation:

> I embarked on this exercise with mild interest and a feeling that it was a luxury I could barely afford in a very busy working life. What I learned about myself, my preconceptions and about how little I have been able to ‘see’ in the past has astonished me.

Without exception, the students spoke positively about what they had derived from the experience. Certain dimensions provided key learning, and I consider these in turn.

*Observation and the transmission of feelings*

A recurrent theme in the observations is an awareness on the part of the observer of the intensity of feelings which they generated, and a recognition that understanding their source is a complex task. A strong identification with the child is apparent and a heightened awareness of the experience of being a child. The observers described graphically their own sense of frustration when the child’s overtures were rejected or passed unnoticed by the adult carers, or where ‘their’ child’s needs were ignored or set aside so that another child could be attended to:

> During one session, a staff member went to make some play dough. When Gill asked her what she was doing she said “I’m making play dough” and ordered G. to go and sit down. An instant dismissal of Gill’s overture.

Equally, the intensity of the child’s enjoyment, the sense of achievement at mastering small tasks, or the child’s pleasurable interaction with the carers were in turn experienced acutely by the observers. For example, one wrote:

> I was struck by the joy Martin experienced in physical play with his dad and the deep gurgling laughter sounds remain with me now.

Not only did the experiences of observing arouse powerful emotions in the observers, they also evoked memories of their own childhood experiences, or their experiences of being parents. Since these must inevitably be a part of what we bring to any situation, the heightened awareness of how these colour our perceptions is an important part of the learning to be derived from the experience of observation.
The intensity of the observers' feelings was often reflected in the group discussion. I was initially concerned at the level of personal reminiscence about group members' own childhood experiences, or their own children, lest the group lose its focus on the particular observation in question. I came to regard this as part of a reflection process, of a need to assimilate and understand the experience of being a child by a process of mimicking as well as by description and discussion. It seems to me likely that where the worker has a clearly defined task such as assessment to undertake in relation to a family, then conscious processes may make him or her less receptive to the transmission of feelings. The relatively unstructured nature of the observation encourages these cognitive processes to be by-passed, and thus the process of identification is more acute. Mattinson (1975), in her discussion of how the worker may reflect in speech or behaviour the feelings of the client, particularly when these are incompletely recognized, comments:

One way of describing is to mimic, particularly for vividness and particularly if we cannot find adequate words to portray the phenomenon. Unconsciously we all mimic, probably more than we realize, continually picking up ways and attitudes from other people without giving them conscious thought. It may be that identification as a means of coming to terms with some phenomenon is one of the most usual and basic forms of psychic management and may be reverted to more strenuously for a period in a learning situation—whether learning about a trade or whether learning about life—in attempting to deal with a new experience... (p. 44)

The extent to which the observer was experiencing and reflecting the feelings of the child and/or his or her carers, or was superimposing on the observations feelings which belonged to the observer was a recurrent theme in the group. For example, we were struck by what felt to be a rather repetitive insistence on the part of one of the students, hitherto an enthusiastic and committed participant, that she was becoming bored by her observations. Exploring these feelings in the group, she concluded that she was reflecting the child's own sense of frustration in the interaction with her mother, who was herself dealing with the anxieties of the diagnosis of a serious medical condition and whose responses to the child were becoming increasingly minimal. Struggling with her own guilt at feeling bored, the student had been unable to identify the deficits in the mother/child interaction, or to differentiate the quality of this from the more positive exchanges which the child experienced with her father.

It also became apparent that the observer's own vulnerabilities and feelings could be projected on to the observation, rather than being derived from it. One student described her acute discomfort at being in the role of the observer, feeling that she was intruding on the family scene where she had no right to be and eventually altering the venue from home to playgroup to avoid further intrusions:

I felt that however well informed and understood, it would still be an intrusive if not invasive activity for K. and her son despite their agreement and acceptance of this.

Since there was no indication from the carers or the child that her presence was unwelcome, she was pressed to explore the source of this discomfort, which seemed to lie in her own difficulty of being acceptable unless she was offering something tangible. Although an exploration of the needs underlying this was inappropriate in the context of this particular group's remit, some beginning recognition was established, and subsequently built on.

Through the discussion of the observations, other group members found themselves also reflecting feelings, probably with greater immediacy because undertaking the task themselves enabled them to identify with the experiences being recounted more strongly. I have described a level of reminiscence around personal childhood experiences which suggested an identification
and attempt to master the experience through a process of mimicry. The group also at times experienced and expressed emotions which, through a recognition of how little relationship they bore to the events described, again made us question their source. For example, in an observation of a bright three-year-old and his very child-centred mother, the observer described rather wistfully a scene where mother and children were absorbed in their play:

Mother and both children sit on the floor and play with the Duplo. There is a farm scene, and bed and bathroom set complete with toilet. Dan fashions a plane and begins to make aeroplane noises.

I felt shut out at this point and watch the family play together. Dan is the plane and Alison is helping Paula to make something of her own. I feel the family have forgotten I am there.

The group, which had hitherto been enjoying the creative and mutually satisfying quality of the interaction between mother and child, became intensely critical of the pair, asserting that the play must have been staged for the observer’s benefit, that Dan was being over-indulged by his mother and so on. So disproportionately critical a reaction suggested to us that, along with the worker, we were being put in touch with our own infantile needs and experiencing jealousy at Dan’s experiences with his mother.

Social work training over the past couple of decades has frequently failed to address issues concerning the ways in which mental and emotional phenomena operate in families and in interaction between client and worker. Some of the reasons for this clearly involve a political shift and an increase in the statutory control function of social work. However, it would also appear to reflect a difficulty in imparting an understanding of psycho-analytic theory in a way which offers a fit with students’ personal and emotional experiences and which enables them to move, to use Bion’s distinction, from a state of ‘knowing about’ to ‘knowing’. The difficulty of translating psychoanalytic concepts into strategies for intervention with clients has also been well documented. There has recently however been a growing recognition of the implications that this emphasis in training has for social workers undertaking emotionally charged work with families (see, for example, Stevenson, 1990).

The direct experience of these phenomena which may be derived from child observation can provide a useful way of heightening students’ awareness of them. As Rustin (1989b) in a discussion of the learning which may take place in observation, suggests:

Students are first enabled to have some intense experience of the mental and emotional phenomena to which psychoanalytic ideas correspond. Then psychoanalytic concepts—e.g. the ideas of unconscious meaning, transference, counter-transference, splitting and projective identification—can be demonstrated in a specific application where they meet a specific need... [i.e. to explain the observed phenomena]. (p. 64)

Some might argue that concepts from other psychological theories have equal explanatory power, and that the development of an understanding of emotional interpersonal transactions does not necessarily have to be addressed through concepts derived from psychoanalytic theory. Nonetheless the basic point remains, that child observation does provide a means of directly experiencing such feelings, and that such experiences illuminate theory and enable the learning thus derived more readily to be generalized to other situations.

Recognition and understanding of attachment behaviour

The implications of the Children Act, with its emphasis on assessment in child protection, suggest that ways need to be found of increasing practitioners’ knowledge and understanding of
attachment behaviour, since an assessment of the quality of the carer/child relationship will be an important component of the care plan. Child observation provides a means of increasing students’ understanding of attachment theory and their familiarity with the range of attachment behaviour. It also provides a means of considering the relationship between theory, research and practice. Again, discussion of the individual experiences in the student groups contributed to the general level of knowledge and understanding among group members. A number of examples serve to illustrate the point.

The observation of a child who ‘froze’, and remained rooted to the spot for a long minute before a hesitant glance at her mother shook the observer, since she had arrived at the family home expecting, as she acknowledged, a normal happy family. She rejected this as a ‘rogue’ finding, only to return in later observations to the conclusion that the child did indeed manifest signs of insecure-attachment behaviour towards her mother, while seeming securely attached to her father.

In another observation, the observer described the behaviour of a three-year-old thus:

He threw himself at mum on the settee, partly affectionate, partly aggressive. Mum responded a little, her arm went partly round him, but it was a very ambiguous movement. A. poked and pulled her. She got up, saying she was going to do the washing up.

Since the observer was already concerned about the extent to which A.’s needs were being met by his mother, this observation provoked a lively discussion as to whether or not this was an indication of insecure-ambivalent behaviour, what other evidence would be needed to support this hypothesis, and the extent to which this ‘live’ observation could be said to be comparable to behaviour which was demonstrated in the laboratory ‘strange situation’ test (see Ainsworth et al., 1978). Finally, the group questioned whether or not the distinctions between types of insecure attachment had any practical utility for their own work.

A recurrent theme of the observations was the importance of other attachment figures in the children’s lives, and this led students to reflect on the tendency in their own practice to make assessments based on observation of the interactions between child and primary caregiver, usually the mother, and to ignore other figures. Equally, they highlighted the limitations of theory in this area, and the difficulties for practitioners in extrapolating findings for their own practice from the existing research evidence.

One student, for example, who had observed the greater intensity of communication and closeness in the father/child than in the mother/child relationship, commented:

Although there have been developments in the theory concerning attachments to other carers, these do not seem to have filtered through to those of us making decisions about child placements.

The observations enabled some students to explore in detail the way in which attachment theory is formulated, and can be applied, giving, as one student described it, a sense of confidence in the ‘intellectual grasp of the theory’.

During my first observation, Tony was out when I arrived at the house. When he arrived back with his mother I was already in the living room talking to his grandfather. He stopped by the doorway and looked at me with suspicion but also keeping close proximity to his mother. This would suggest that a stranger in the house causes him sufficient concern to activate his attachment system which in turn led to an observable regulation of behaviour designed to maintain contact with the attachment figure (his mother).
Observation, hypothesis and assessment

The observations provided repeated illustration of the need to distinguish observation from hypothesis, and the impact that personal attitudes and values have both on what is observed and the interpretation placed on it. Equally, it became important to recognize that repeated patterns of behaviour could be discerned on which valid assessments could be based—i.e. that it was possible to obtain some objectively verifiable factual information. Finally, students experienced the need to revise earlier impressions in the light of later observations, and reflected with concern on the relative brevity of the contacts on which social work assessments are frequently based.

One student chose to observe a child on whom there had been a number of minor unexplained injuries in the context of a social services nursery with an excellent reputation. She commented:

I therefore, anticipated during the course of my observations that I would discover evidence to support this reputation.

Instead, by the second observation:

What I did note was the repetitious behaviour of the staff in taking Mary to the toilet and the frequency with which her clothes were changed, a practice not followed with any of the other children in the nursery [and which seemed to have been adopted to enable the staff to check discretely for bruises]. I was also aware of derogatory comments which were made in front of her.

The observation over a period of weeks enabled the student not only to look afresh at the interactions between Mary and her carers, in this case the nursery staff, but ‘to validate and gain evidence to support’ her view that Mary’s needs were not being met in the establishment.

Other observations led the observed to modify an impression gained at an earlier stage. For example, one student had observed what appeared to be rigid and insensitive behaviour on the part of the foster parent towards a three-year-old child in insisting that she must ask for the door to be opened:

Fifteen minutes after the previous episode, J. (the foster-parent) told her to get some toilet paper. Approximately 3 minutes later L. had not returned. She was again standing on her own outside the toilet door [the handle being out of reach].

However, by the end of the observations, this was seen in the context of repeated observation of responsive behaviour from the foster mother, which evidently took account of L.’s needs and age. Although the student remained concerned about the foster mother’s overly strict approach to some aspects of child rearing, the opportunity for sustained observation led the observer to conclude that despite certain deficits, overall the placement offered the child a ‘good enough’ experience of being cared for.

Another student was startled to find, when she presented her observation of a child living with her mother that other group members disagreed with her presentation of mother and cohabitee as ‘intelligent, caring, balanced and child-centred’. It highlighted for her the fact that they ‘interpreted background information differently, forming alternative assumptions based on their own experiences and values’, and that ‘the presentation of family information created different images for different members of the group’, leading to differing conclusions as to the positive nature of the child’s environment:

Cindy’s mother was in her thirties, had three children, all of them with different fathers. Cindy was the youngest child and her father was a part of this household, but also had his own flat. Both parents had many interests and although their lifestyle was relatively simple, they enjoyed art, music, books . . . Both were unemployed . . .
Some members of the group saw M. as someone who possibly couldn’t sustain a relationship . . . I saw her as being very much in control of her own life.

It is of course a truism that all perceptions depend on the perceiver, and one might recognize in the above discussion the somewhat sterile debates concerning whether one can ever make an accurate assessment at all, which perhaps characterized student discussions in the seventies rather more than they do now. However, this experience was significant for the group, not only because it provided a stark reminder to potentially world-weary practitioners of the dangers of prejudging situations: it also enabled them to move on to recognize what evidence from observations there was to support or refute a particular view.

Child development and family relationships

Arguably the skills about process which I have described above are the key learnings which child observation affords, principally because they provide experiential underpinnings for theoretical knowledge which it is difficult otherwise to achieve. Nonetheless, the presentation of detailed observations of a range of children and their families does provide students with information about the cognitive, physical and emotional development of children, and about pre-verbal and non-verbal communication. On our course, in addition, where health visitors train alongside social workers, it was noticeable that the health visitors tended in their observations to comment more precisely than did the social workers on such things as the children’s language and sensory-motor development, which in turn sharpened the social workers’ awareness of certain aspects of development. Over the weeks of the course, and partly as a result of comparing detailed observations of children of similar ages, the students’ grasp of facets of development, and their ability to link theoretical knowledge to what they observed or heard reported was enhanced.

Issues of gender, race and culture

The pooling, as it were, of experiences within the group also ensures that students address such issues as parenting skills, cultural variations, class and gender and consider a range of different family patterns. In the context of developing anti-discriminatory practice, such opportunities provide valuable learning experiences. Often, as in the example of Cindy and her mother, above, it is only through the reactions of others to what has been described that the observer becomes aware of his or her own preconceptions (and those of other group members) about a given situation or family dynamic. The content of the group discussion also indicates a heightened awareness of personal responses to gender, class and ethnic background. One (male) student, for example, felt himself to be intruding on what seemed to him to be the very female domestic morning routine in a way that he had hitherto not experienced. Others found themselves confronting their own anti-middle class bias.

Finally, for those working with children and families, the opportunity to study a family where there are no identified problems is useful in helping them address such issues as ‘normality’ and ‘cultural relativity’, and to begin to work out for themselves what constitutes ‘good enough’ in the context of family relationships and child care.

Issues in the structuring of training in child observation

For those contemplating the introduction of child observation in social work training, some comment on the structure of this derived from our experience is included.
Support group

This is an essential part of the process and should be held with sufficient frequency and be of a small enough size (an optimum of eight) to ensure that its main purposes are met. These purposes include the need:

(i) to ensure that students are given the opportunity to share any difficulties which they are experiencing. These may include concerns over what action to take when an apparently abusing situation is observed; the experiencing of powerful feelings aroused by the observation; difficulties in maintaining the observer role; requests for advice from the carers; and so on;

(ii) to provide an opportunity for the observer and other group members to move from the unstructured narrative record of events, conversations and feelings, to making sense of these, and exploring underlying theoretical concepts;

(iii) to allow the expression of feelings arising from the observation and to enable the observer more accurately to identify the source of these, through discussion with other group members;

(iv) to provide the forum for the exchange of information concerning child development, family relationships, etc.

Students should have the opportunity to present their material formally on at least two occasions. The observation narrative should be copied for all group members and read aloud by the observer, since this ensures that the experience is more directly communicated to other group members, and the observer’s feelings at particular points in the narrative can be identified.

Number of observations

These should be sufficient in number to ensure that the observer becomes familiar with the child and setting and thus able to notice changes, to re-assess initial impressions, to get in touch with the emotional content of the observations and to gain experience of being a participant observer with the dilemmas that this presents. It seems probable that observations conducted over a longer period of time will provide a greater intensity of experience for the participants. However most courses will be limited in the time available: our experience to date suggests that eight week observations provide considerable learning opportunities, but the optimum number is clearly a matter for further discussion in the light of the experiences of other courses.

Selection of the child

Given the considerable investment of their time in the exercise, students are encouraged to select a child in a setting which has interest for them. Twins, children in foster-care, a sighted child with a visually impaired mother, a four-year-old attending nursery, a child from a mixed race family, a child living with mother and grandmother, a child with professional parents, were all selected because their age or circumstances held an immediate appeal for the particular observer. Students are asked not to select a child where they are involved professionally, because of the difficulty of combining the observer with the statutory role. They are also asked to clarify that there is no ‘hidden agenda’ in the referral: for example it became evident that one child was being put forward because there were concerns about possible non-accidental injuries, and the observation was seen as providing an opportunity for monitoring the situation. Experience also suggests that selecting a child known socially to the observer potentially presents difficulties: in one instance, the identification of possible emotional abuse was made more problematic because of the observer’s personal links with the family; in another, where the observer visited an acquaintance, accompanied on occasion by his own child, the quality of the experience and therefore his learning, seemed substantially reduced.
Conclusion

This paper has discussed the introduction of child observation on a post-qualifying, multidisciplinary training course, has considered some of the structural issues which need to be addressed, and analysed some of the learning derived by those undertaking the observations. It is possible that the experience has a particular impact on practitioners, who bring to it already an accumulation of experience, and savour the freedoms which it offers in contrast to the demands of practice. However, our experience suggests that there would be considerable benefits for students on qualifying courses who intend to work with children, and that arguably, the exercise could usefully be extended to those intending to work with other client groups (such as the elderly). Since its introduction in social work training is in a relatively embryonic stage, it is to be hoped that others will contribute from their own experience in order to improve the way in which it is taught.

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