Retaining and supporting experienced child and family social workers

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Introduction

- Retaining experienced SWS is a long-standing issue in CFSW, particularly in child protection teams and 'frontline' services (Baginsky, 2013)

- Average working life of a SW approximately 7.5 yrs, compared to 25 years for a doctor and 16 years for a nurse (Curtis *et al,* 2010)

- On 30 September 2020, 60.1% of FTE children and family social workers had been in service at their current local authority for less than 5 years (DfE, 2021)

- Little is known about experiences and career trajectories of those that stay in the profession in the long-term and few studies have focused on experienced 'stayers'

- After 5 yrs, SWs' retention narratives intensify, organisational embeddedness and confidence increases (Burns e*t al,* 2020)

The research

Research questions

- What helps experienced social workers to stay in the profession, esp. frontline teams?
- How do social workers develop a sense of professional identity over time?
- What is the relationship between professional identity and retention in CFSW?

Methods

- Qualitative interviews with social workers using Flick's (2000) episodic interviewing technique
- Captured professional identity across the career span and critical career 'episodes' which shaped identity development and intention to stay/leave
- Thematic and narrative analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008; Flick 2000)

Sample

- Participants (n=58) were qualified SWs from 11 local authorities in England

- All were practicing SWs with ≥ 8 years post-qualifying experience – **'stayers'**

- 48 (83%) female, 10 (17% male)

- Average (mean) 14 years as a qualified CFSW (Range 8 - 40 years)

- All were in, or had spent time in 'frontline' CFSW

- 34.5% considered themselves to be still in frontline practice

Social Worker	Senior Social Worker	First-line manager	Middle-manager or Head of Service	Other
17 (29.3%)	17 (29.3%)	16 (27.5%)	4 (6.8%)	4 (6.8%)

Professional identity among 'stayers'

For experienced workers who had stayed in the profession, social work had become an intrinsic part of their identity:

Being a social worker... it just kind of feels like it's in my DNA now... being a social worker is like breathing; it's almost like I don't think I'll ever not think and feel like one. It's difficult to imagine a life without social work in it – it's that ingrained... it sort of feels like it's in your bones after ten years. (SW37)

I think it's become a way of life in a lot of ways, so social work is really a way of life that I choose to live my life. (SW40)

Personal and professional identity integration

For experienced SWs, being a SW was not something that could be 'switched off' - personal and professional self were integrated:

The two are very intertwined, there is not a separate me who is a social worker and a separate me who is not me personally. So, all of my values and belief systems and personality are absolutely intwined with me being a social worker. (SW28)

I mean my son sums it up in a nutshell. He said mum, 'can we not go to the supermarket without the cashier telling you all their life history before we've paid for our food.' But I think that it does that to you. I think you become such a questioning person... (SW18)

Critical Career Episodes

- CCEs were defining moments in SWs careers which were emotive, often challenging and triggered this 'identity work' (Winkler, 2018)

- CCEs shaped and often strengthened SWs professional identity, often generating meaning, value and reinforcing the SW's intention to stay in the profession

- However, they could cause SWs to feel a push to leave the profession and some did (even though they came back to CFSW) via sick leave, leave of absence, changing role or side-stepping to another area of SW

- CCEs were points of reference throughout SWs careers – frequently revisited throughout the SWs career and from which they continued to derive meaning

Critical career episodes: deriving ongoing meaning and purpose

- CCEs were vital in the development of professional identity – while difficult, these seminal episodes could ultimately provide a sense meaning and purpose, motivating social workers to stay in the profession

They stay with you, don't they? I have lots of little bits of children in my heart. (SW47)

...I can remember a domestic abuse case... we supported her to get away from the perpetrator and helped her set her life back up. I felt really positive about that because she worked with us really well and she didn't feel judged by us and she knew that we were supporting her, and she was able to keep her son safe and get a new home and start again almost. And she was really grateful for our involvement. (SW16)

Critical career episodes: the importance of 'firsts' in shaping professional identity

On sitting in a CP conference for the first time:

…it was… very terrifying for her and I equally felt quite terrified sitting in the child protection conference, and I always remember thinking, I'm *never* going to forget this is how it feels sitting in a child protection conference for the first time. (SW2)

- SW developed a deep empathy and respect for parents and a resolve for the sort of SW she would like to be throughout her career

- Other 'firsts' included going to Court, feeling physically threatened, becoming a manager – difficult but when processed, could help to strengthen professional identity over time

Critical career episodes as challenge to professional identity and retention

CCEs could represent a threat to professional identity – particularly moral and ethical dilemmas. If insurmountable, this could result in SWs leaving the profession:

I did one parenting assessment on a mum who I was really concerned about, and there was loads of risk because she was in a relationship with a prolific offender... For whatever reason, the allocated social worker was not wanting to see those risks and disputed those risks. So, I was in a situation where I was a hostile witness to the local authority...I had no support from managers, I had no legal representation. And it was a very lonely place and it almost made me ill. (SW17)

Professional identity development and retention across the career span

Professional identity development

Identity work → CCE → (cycle)
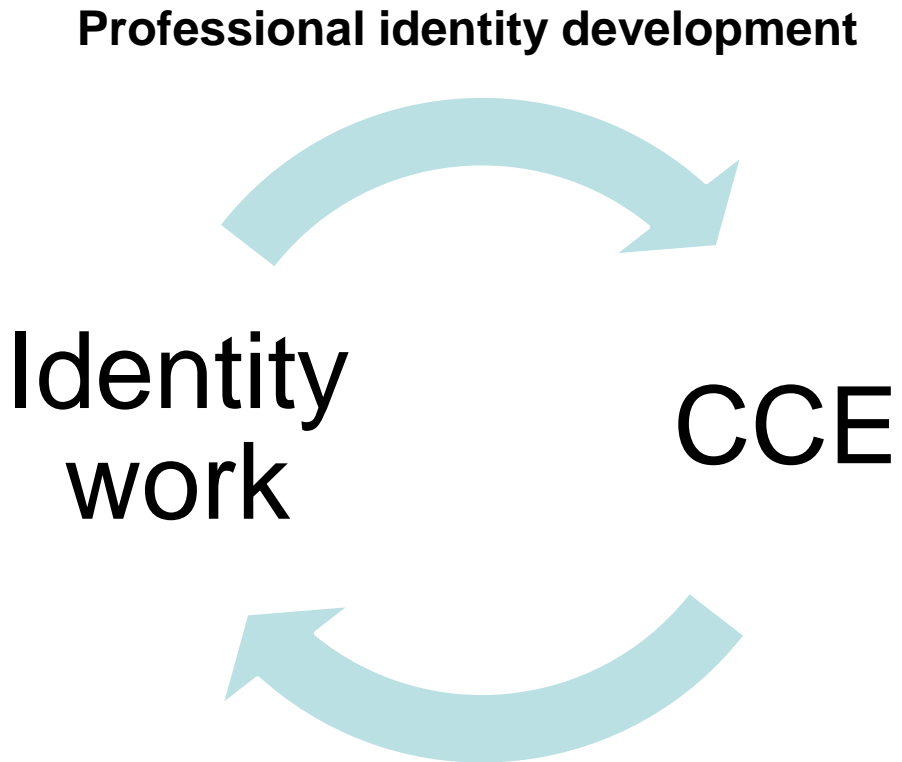
Resolved: accrued knowledge, expertise, strengthened professional identity - intent to stay

Unresolved: threat to professional identity – think about leaving

Career progression – key to identity work and retention

- Whilst more attention is typically given to NQSW's in the literature, professional identity work continues across the career span

- To stay in the profession SWs need to continue to find purpose and meaning in the work, rather than 'more of the same'

- Career opportunities that allowed them to reflect on their learning from CCEs and share this learning with others, facilitated continued meaningful identity development

- Management could be a route for such work, but social workers were clear that there needed to be more options and alternative specialist career progression opportunities

Career progression – to manage or not to manage?

- Career progression outside management was limited – this could curtail opportunities for development and reduce motivation to stay in the profession

I used to work for an IT company... it had two career pathways. One was management, and one was specialism... you could be on the same grade and receive the same pay as managers if you had a specialism. So, it was a recognition that not everybody is cut out to be a people manager. Not everybody has that skillset. But offered an alternative route to career progression and salary progression through a specialism route and I don't understand why we don't have that in social work. (SW20)

In social work now, you, kind of, have two directions, you have two types of social worker. You have one that wants to go through a management route, might want to be an AD one day. And then, I think you've got another type of social worker who doesn't necessarily want to go through a management route, might want to go through more of a practice specialism type route. I was definitely the latter. (SW48)

Examples of practice-focused (specialism) roles and career pathways across the 11 LAs

Educational specialisms	Practice specialisms	Support/ workforce development specialisms	Complementary specialisms
Practice Educator S47 training ABE training	Specialist assessment worker Direct work with children Sitting on panels Signs of Safety champion Principal Social Worker Care Order discharge Chairing Reviews IRO CSE and exploitation Offending Autism specialist The local authority designated officer (LADO) Parenting Assessor Children's Participation	Mentor AYSE Development Emotional wellbeing lead Group supervision lead Practice improvement role Practice development role Workforce development Improvement and QA Principal social work practitioner	Theraplay Therapist Systemic counselling Family Therapy Anna Freud Story Stem training Systemic Family Therapy Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy

Supporting specialism - enabling the next generation

- Supporting the development of others enabled experienced SWs to find continued meaning in their work and provided strong motivation to remain in the profession

…having students makes you think as a practitioner… when they ask you questions – you think, "Yeah, why am I doing that and why do we do it like that?" … So, having a student affected my learning and my … need to know answers that I'd probably thought, "Oh well, I'll find that out tomorrow. (SW 36)

It's about training the next generation…making sure these new social workers have got the same fight in them for these children and their families. (SW 31)

Cf Erikson's generativity vs stagnation

Supporting specialism - matching interest and passion

- Matching specialism to interest and passion could allow continued development for SWs and promote retention

Autism was my passion. When I was an Autism specific social worker that was everything I could have possibly hoped for as a social worker in my career...So, yes, it was the right trajectory, I was very lucky in finding the right roles and the roles that suited what I would have hoped (SW28)

When I was in the MASH team I helped shaped and develop the CSE team (SW41)

Supporting specialism – the benefits

- Specialism as a buffer to burnout and as a way to retain expert support for frontline services

If there was a way of creating... roles... for those people who don't want to, like me... be in management but... can't, for whatever reason, because they're experiencing burnout, can't keep that pace of child protection, care proceedings... going and actually create different opportunities... go into specialisms and do some research and... a specialist area of practice (SW47)

I feel I can do a lot more and help the teenagers more than I could with babies, I guess. So, I think you have to match yourself, it's like a jigsaw puzzle, there are so many different branches of social work you can do you've just got to find the right match for yourself, and I think that's when they get retention (SW31)

Supporting specialism – the barriers

- Experienced SWs emphasised that opportunities for training and development need to be purposeful and relevant to their level of expertise

...a lot of the training I go on is I've done 10 times, or it's just a different version of the training I've done before, and again it's not at that level that I need it to be at. So yeah, I think training specifically for experienced social workers would be good. (SW39)

I don't think enough notice is always given to more experienced practitioners about the need for them to be supported to proactively look at what their learning needs may be... there hasn't been ready access to me becoming better-educated, I suppose, along the way. (SW55)

Secondment as an alternative - 'getting off the production line'

- Secondment opportunities prevent stagnation, facilitate continued development among experienced SWs and can prevent SWs from leaving the profession

It's like being a battery hen, you churn it, you just churn it, because you are on this... production line... I think the practice system tends to get a little bit siloed... I suppose, it's like being a kidney specialist or a heart specialist, can you rotate, can you have a specialism and then go on a rotation somewhere... I don't think you can keep people for longer. I think, actually, everyone should move team or service area every two or three years (SW48)

...one of the things that helped me to stay was doing different roles. Yes, it's social work but within different capacity. And I think if you were to move around a little bit and try different things and go to different teams, actually that helps often for me personally. (SW19)

Implications

- Professional identity development continues throughout the career span and opportunities for reflection on CCEs are important for all career stages

- To retain experienced CFSWs, LAs need to invest in development opportunities for mid and late career SWs

- Need to develop alternative career pathways to management

- Meaningful specialisms (not just one-off training) are important – particularly opportunities which allow workers to share their practice wisdom (including CCEs) with the next generation of SWs

- A 'ground-up' approach to developing specialisms is important – draw on SWs knowledge of their communities

- Professional mobility is important – secondment, rotation as opportunities to take stock, share expertise and 'get off the production line' - may ultimately help to retain expertise in frontline teams

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