

# Developing and evaluating mentalizing capacity and skill in qualifying social work education

**Report of collaborative curriculum  
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by

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## **1. Introduction**

Developing the capacity and skill in social workers to make sense of and help mend relationships in practice is accepted once more. Understanding how relationships go wrong or get 'stuck' is at the heart of professional judgement and decision-making. Using the social work relationship itself in a reparative way is the basis of effective practice. This much is now recognised in the Knowledge and Skills Statements produced by the Chief Social Workers of England. 'Child and Family Social Workers' are required to 'Build purposeful, effective relationships with children and families, which are both authoritative and compassionate....' (Department for Education, 2014). 'Social Workers in Adult Services need to apply a wide range of knowledge and skills to understand and build relationships, and work directly with individuals, their families and carers to enable and empower them to achieve best outcomes.' (Department of Health, 2015).

The social work curriculum at all levels is now under revision in the light of these requirements. Renewed attention is being given to the claims of a number of 'relationship-based' methods which seek not only to build practitioner capacity and skill in direct work but also to inform the system of practice as a whole put in place in each agency. One such approach draws on the theory of 'mentalization', now used widely to inform practice in many child and adult mental health settings where it is shown to be effective in enabling the development of the 'therapeutic alliance' necessary to facilitate change (Fonagy and Allison, 2012; Fonagy and Campbell, 2016); (Green, 2015). In social work itself, mentalization has become noticed primarily because of the demonstrable relevance of attachment theory on which the core and allied constructs, such as 'reflective functioning' are based (Howe, 2011).

This report describes a pilot curriculum development and evaluation project designed to introduce mentalization-based methods developed in one such setting into qualifying social work courses at two English Universities and to evaluate the impact on student capacity to mentalize. A Department for Education funded partnership established between the University of Sussex, the University of East Anglia (UEA) and the Anna Freud Centre (AFC), London, enabled practitioners in the AFC Early Years Parenting Unit (EYPU) to contribute directly to workshop teaching in both sites across the final two years of qualifying courses. Additionally, AFC clinical research expertise was drawn on to enable the development and administration of a novel measure of student social worker capacity to mentalize in the practice role. The project formed one part of a

strategy intended by the AFC to evaluate the effectiveness of the innovative EYPU model of early intervention and disseminate findings in ways which would enable 'mentalization' to be adopted more widely as an evidence-based practice method in complex family situations.

Following a brief discussion of the concept of 'mentalization' and its relevance for social work practice, the report describes project curriculum development procedures in the two university sites and project evaluation methodology. Project findings are presented and their implications for further curriculum development discussed briefly in conclusion.

## **2. Mentalization and social work practice**

### **What is mentalization?**

Mentalization can be defined as:

*..the mental process by which an individual implicitly and explicitly interprets the actions of himself and others as meaningful on the basis of intentional mental states such as personal desires, needs, feelings, beliefs and reasons. (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004, p.21).*

Put simply, mentalizing is the process that happens when we try to make sense of our own and other people's mental states. Most mentalization occurs as a non-conscious and implicit process; we use non-verbal cues to signal our own mental states and to grasp the mental states of others. Mentalization can also occur explicitly – where we put mental states into words. For instance, a father might say to a crying baby 'oh, you are feeling so hungry!', thus putting his inference about the infant's mental state into words. However, mental states are opaque; that is, we cannot know what another person is thinking and feeling with certainty. In this sense, mentalization is an 'imaginative' (Fonagy *et al*, 2006: 54) activity, requiring the individual to creatively hypothesise about what another may be thinking or feeling, while remaining open to revising their hypothesis in the light of further information. In the example of the crying infant, for instance, the mentalizing parent may consider a number of possibilities in terms of their child's mental state, such as tiredness, hunger, boredom or fear. Their response to the child may then address these different possibilities - they may offer the child some food, or may revise their response to offer a reassuring hug if that seems more appropriate. Mentalization therefore involves a stance of curiosity and flexibility - the ability to think about what other people are feeling, while at the same time a willingness to acknowledge that we cannot know with certainty what someone thinks and feels.

### **Links to attachment theory, theory of mind and relational trauma**

Our capacity to mentalize is a developmental achievement which relates to the quality of our attachment relationships. Securely-attached individuals with an attuned caregiver tend to have a greater capacity to be able to represent their own mental states and those of others. In this sense, mentalization is closely related to the concept of theory of mind – the ability to attribute mental states to others and oneself. In a secure relationship, the child develops the capacity to recognise and regulate feelings as well as to manage relationships. However, the concept of mentalization compels attention especially because it provides a psychological explanation of mental state capacity rooted in those close social relationships that are the core focus of social work practice. This includes relationships that have been and remain traumatic, which are precisely those that require most social work attention (Allen, 2013).

### **What makes mentalizing difficult? When do we lose the capacity to think clearly?**

In conditions of heightened emotional arousal we tend to find it more difficult to mentalize. When we are stressed our capacity to think about what might be going on in the minds of other people is reduced. For individuals who have experienced poor early attachment relationships, heightened levels of emotion are likely to further compound the difficulties they have in mentalizing. However, it is important to recognise we can all become poor mentalizers in times of stress and heightened emotion – this is true of social workers as well as service users. During such times we are prone to slip into more primitive, non-mentalizing modes of thinking such as:

- **Psychic equivalence:** The assumption that because I think or feel something internally, it is automatically true of the external world e.g. I feel attacked by another professional *therefore* the other professional is out to get me in reality (a mentalizing stance might be 'I feel attacked and cross... maybe it's because I feel stressed about my caseload in general, I've had a bad day so it could be that I'm taking things personally, etc.);
- **Pretend mode:** This mode of thinking is characterised by inconsequential talk, or abstract rationalisation, where the individual's feelings are split from their thoughts. The individual's narrative does not relate to here-and-now reality;
- **Teleological thinking:** In this mode of thinking, only physical actions are considered to be evidence of a person's mental state or intention. For example, a parent might say to a child 'you don't love me unless you do x' or a group of professionals might become preoccupied by whether or not a parent has

attended all the session of a parenting programme, rather than thinking about what the non-attendance might mean, or what might be going on in the mind of the parent in relation to their child. Similarly, a service user might believe that the only way their social worker can show they care for them is to write a letter to the housing department for them *now* – nothing else would be accepted as ‘proof’.

### **Why is mentalization an important concept for social workers?**

Since mentalization describes the process through which one understands one’s own behaviours as shaped by one’s own mental states (such as emotions and values), it is closely allied to, but not simply subsumed by, more familiar concepts such as ‘emotional intelligence’ and ‘reflective practice’. Social workers need to have an understanding of their own value-base, emotions and responses to service users in order to practice reflectively rather than reactively.

Mentalization can provide a useful framework for thinking about:

- How the ‘service user/client’ experiences their world and their involvement with professionals;
- How this experience is accounted for by previous social relationships;
- How the emotional responses of professionals may impact on their ability to think clearly;
- How the professional network around the ‘service user/client’ may lose the capacity to think.

### **Recognising when service users may have difficulties in mentalizing**

An individual who is unable to mentalize their own mental states may *enact* their emotions. For instance, a young person might destroy a classroom (perhaps enacting anger), or an individual might take an overdose (perhaps an enactment of grief) and yet be unable to explain why they did so, even after the event. It is important to:

- recognise when an individual may have lost the capacity to think. Trying to reason with someone who has temporarily lost the capacity to think may exacerbate the situation. It is tempting to try to convince the individual that their view point is incorrect, and that there is no need for them to be angry/upset/distressed. However, any information that is given at this point may simply be more ‘noise’. In this situation it may be best to:

- help the individual to down-regulate their emotions – slow the interaction down, provide space, don't bombard with the person with information or actions. This may help you to:
- return to the topic and discuss what happened when the individual has calmed down. However, it is important to recognise someone who has difficulties in mentalizing (e.g. as a result of poor early attachment experiences), may not be able to identify how they felt or name their feelings. It may be useful to ask the individual to rewind to what happened just before the event. What happened? Who said what? What happened next? This may help the person to construct a narrative about their actions and begin to link it to their mental state.

### **Recognising when social workers have difficulties in mentalizing**

In their daily work social workers are confronted with highly emotive material and may work with people who are mistrustful or hostile towards them. Under such emotional stress, professionals can lose the capacity to mentalize and may be subject to the types of primitive thinking listed above. Here are some examples of things social workers might do when they lose the capacity to mentalize their own emotions and those of their clients:

- Make lots of referrals to other agencies (enacting, rather than reflecting on fear, uncertainty or anxiety about the about the case leading the social worker to want to 'pass it on')
- Become punitive with service users – such as putting them on the spot in a meeting, or trying to 'catch them out' (the social worker may be enacting their anger or frustration with a service user)
- Begin to collude with a client or lose their professional boundaries (this may be the result of a service user idealizing them, or treating the social worker as somehow 'special' or better than his/her colleagues)

It is therefore vital for social workers to have a space to mentalize their own emotions in response to service users. Questions to reflect on might include:

- How does this service user make me feel? Why?
- What do I do as a result of these feelings?

If social workers can identify and process feelings towards service users they are more likely to be able to offer an effective response, rather than 'acting out' emotions. Supervision and peer support is vital in helping professionals with explicit mentalization – that is, to put into words what might be going on at an emotional level



between the social worker and a service user. It is important to be able to recognise and acknowledge in supervision uncomfortable or negative feelings that a professional might feel towards a service user otherwise these feelings can be acted out.

### **Recognising when professional networks have difficulties in mentalizing**

Just as individual workers can experience difficulties in thinking clearly, professional networks can also lose the capacity to think and work together, particularly in response to highly emotive case or service users who provoke a strong emotional response. Some professionals in the group might come to be identified as 'bad' by service users (often social workers find themselves in this position as part of their role involves use of authority). As a result, the professional system itself may come to reflect this split between 'good' and 'bad' workers, or those that are 'on the side of the family' and those who are 'against' them. Here are some examples of what might happen in professional networks as a result:

- Professionals might adopt an adversarial/combatative stance towards each other. This is a barrier to effective communication
- Service users can be bombarded with 'actions' or given contradictory advice from different professionals
- The professional network itself can mirror and compound the dysfunctional relationships that the service user may have experienced historically
- The professional network can lose sight of the service user

In situations where the professional network has become 'stuck' or adversarial it can be useful to try to mentalize the split – that is, to think about the states of mind of each of the professionals involved. Using genograms with service users is familiar tool in order to facilitate reflection about relationships. It may be useful to visually map the professional network in a similar fashion. Questions to consider might include: Who is involved? How concerned are they? What does each person think? What are they concerned about? What is the relationship between professionals, as well as between professionals and the service user? How might this impact on their perspective? Mentalizing the professional network in this way may assist in restoring the capacity to think, as opposed to simply enacting emotional states.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of mentalization is therefore particularly relevant for social work, offering a way of understanding service users' and practitioners experiences alike and providing an underpinning methodology for effective relationship-based practice. Importantly, mentalization also provides an empirically informed conceptual framework to support the enhancement of reflective practice in social work education. The following chapter describes the adoption of this way of thinking within the qualifying social work curriculum across two universities.

## **3. Curriculum development**

### **Introduction**

The Project was inaugurated in 2013, with the establishment of a Steering Group which met on a termly basis over the following two years. Chaired by AFC leads (Minna Daum/Duncan McLean) and convened at the Anna Freud Centre in London, Group membership included Project leads (Luckock, Schofield and Cossar) and researchers (Bostock at Sussex/ Cook at UEA) from both Universities. Latterly, the Group was supported by the expert advice provided by AFC clinical researchers (Sleed & Asquith). Project implementation took place during the two academic years commencing in September 2013, enabling those students graduating and qualifying as social workers in summer 2015 to benefit from curriculum enhancement and to contribute to the impact evaluation.

At Sussex the Project was introduced on the two year MASW course. At UEA it was made available to students taking the two year MA course and those completing the last two years of the three year BA course. In both sites students were advised that the curriculum would be enhanced for their cohort during 2013-2015 by the addition of dedicated teaching and learning on 'mentalization', provided on a Project basis in collaboration with Anna Freud Centre practitioners.

In this chapter details of Project implementation focus on the ways in which AFC-led teaching and learning was incorporated into the existing course structures and cultures at Sussex and UEA. In the following chapter the evaluation design and implementation methodology is described.

## **The Project sites**

### **University of Sussex**

Teaching and learning on the MASW takes place separately from that for the BASW course. Course design rests on the twin principles of concurrent practice experience and University-based education. Students join a TMVIP<sup>1</sup> tutor group on arrival comprising a maximum of 12 students. Led by their personal academic tutor this group meets weekly for the most part during the year. In the first year the TMVIP curriculum is generic in focus enabling learning from taught modules, practice skills and other workshops, reading and written assignments to be integrated with practice experience through group discussion once 70 day placements start (in January). In the second year TMVIP groups are re-established in accordance with the statutory social work role taken up in the 100 day placement, enabling a specialist practice focus to be consolidated prior to qualification and initial employment. The TMVIP sequence provides the core context for integrating personal development and professional learning with regard to the social work role and task, in a closed group setting. The tutor, who will be a Registered Social Worker as well as an academic advisor, models professional leadership and support.

The taught modules are front-loaded. Human Development and Social Relationships (HDSR), Social Adversity Risk and Resilience (SAAR) and Law and Social Policy (LSP) are taken in the first term of the course, prior to commencement of the first placement. Organisations and Inter-professional Practice (OIP) is taken concurrently with the second placement, during which time students also undertake a Child Observation and seminar sequence, based on the familiar Tavistock model. Prior to Project inception learning related directly to the theory and practice of 'mentalization' took place in the initial module programme. Attachment theory is taught within a lifespan perspective in HDSR. Learning is consolidated in group work undertaken with three 'service user' teaching team members whose life stories form the basis of engagement with core concepts. In SAAR the implications for social work practice of thinking psycho-socially about the statutory role and task at each point of the life-span are explored and methods of assessment introduced.

### **University of East Anglia (UEA)**

Teaching and learning at UEA on the MA and BA has blocks of teaching that include modules on Human Growth and Behaviour, Social Work Theory, Law and Social Policy,

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<sup>1</sup> Theory, Methods and Values in Practice

Professional Practice with a range of service users. While on placement, students also have regular taught days that focus on practice skills and build on placement experiences, using small groups and workshops.

A number of existing modules were relevant to supporting the implementation of learning about mentalization based social work. Students attend lectures on attachment and psychosocial understandings of development across the life course. They also undertake a Child Observation unit, based on the Tavistock model, during which students undertake a five session observation of an individual child, with a focus on reflecting on the thoughts and feelings of the child and links to behaviour as well as reflecting on their own thoughts, feelings and their sources in their own personal and professional background. As part of practice skills development, students also participate in a filmed role play with actors and write a reflective essay which includes a focus on their emotional responses to the task and their influence on the interaction.

‘Relationship-based social work’ in particular, with its focus on conscious and unconscious processes, is an important component of the teaching at UEA, and uses genograms, timelines and emotional maps to facilitate students’ reflection on their own life experiences. This module links to a unit on ‘Working in organisations’ which focuses on interpersonal dynamics and unconscious processes within placement settings. It draws on the work of Menzies-Lyth and the Tavistock tradition of observing organisations. The underlying principle is that social work is emotive and anxiety provoking work and that the way the work is organised can help or hinder staff in managing that anxiety, ultimately in ways that impact on service users. Students are encouraged to see themselves as a participant observer on placement – each student does a presentation about their organization, aiming for a ‘thick description’ covering matters as varied as interprofessional working, staff turnover and workload, the physical layout of the building and hot-desking. Small groups of students discuss each placement, its primary task, and how organizational factors impact on the way the workers think about and manage their feelings towards service users.

### **Anna Freud Centre curriculum input**

In both University sites AFC curriculum input on mentalization took the form of a workshop sequence provided for all students in the respective cohorts across the two academic years, 2013-2015. Led by Minna Daum, (Senior Family Therapist and Clinical Manager, AFC) and Nicola Labushagne (Clinical Psychologist) workshops were intended

from the outset to engage students in making sense of mentalization as a personal and professional capacity and skill. The workshop sequence and local course adaptation consistent with Project implementation varied slightly in each site.

### **University of Sussex**

During the first year of the Project (2013-2014) all MASW students attended one whole and one half day workshop, provided by AFC colleagues Minna Daum and Nicola Labushagne. These workshops were timetabled in the normal way, as part of a sequence of fifteen 'Practice Development Workshops' already provided in support of placement learning. Practice Development Workshops are delivered by current practitioners with the aim to translate key theoretical concepts to live practice situations. The majority of workshops utilise role play and case studies to support students to develop key communication, assessment and intervention skills needed for practice.

The first workshop was given in March 2014. The aims of the day were to:

- provide an overview of 'mentalization', attachment and human development from a practice perspective;
- understand how 'mentalization' can be utilised in the assessment of risk;
- explore the impact of complex cases on professionals, with a focus especially on the use of authority in practice and skills in maintaining the practitioner's capacity to think in these contexts.

The day comprised of taught lecture component of key concepts supported by video, case study and practice examples. The timing of the workshop in the spring term was helpful as it served to refresh and consolidate input delivered on taught modules in the first term. Enhancements had been made to teaching by Departmental faculty in HDSR and SAAR modules previously in the autumn term, on the core theoretical concepts underpinning 'mentalization'. Consistent with the professional learning approach on the course, students had also begun their first practice placement and were able to make immediate links between the ideas and cases discussed in the AFC and other workshops and their own experience of working with adults and children on placement.

A second half-day workshop was arranged in May 2014. The focus of the afternoon was to:

- consolidate key 'mentalization' concepts through the use of 'live' case presentations drawn from placement experience across contrasting practice settings;
- explore how students had started to make use of 'mentalization' constructs to understand their own and their client's mental states in practice.

Student-led case presentations, facilitated by AFC trainers and a plenary discussion enabled feelings stirred up in practice encounters to be expressed in the group. Subsequently, it was agreed with AFC trainers that further time was needed for the impact of this exercise to be reflected on within the 'mentalization' workshop sequence. A further half-day workshop was arranged for the start of the second year of the course (October 2014), to enable learning from the first two workshops to be reflected on prior to commencement of the second (100 day) placement and the second phase of Practice Development Workshop sequence. Contrasting feelings about the legitimacy of the authoritative stance required of the social worker in practice, arising in the previous workshops, were explored further. Consistent with the course learning strategy, AFC trainers and Sussex workshop leads were able to model that capacity to think from a curious stance. In this case student mental states with regard to the feelings of uncertain authority attaching to the social work role could be speculated upon and understood, rather than avoided and displaced. This workshop was supported by a de-briefing session led by the Co-ordinator of the 'Service User and Carer Network' whose members are part of the core teaching and assessment team at Sussex.

Thereafter, through the second year of the Project (2014-2015), Practice Educators responsible for supporting students through their 100 day placement (in statutory child and family or adult service settings) were included in the Project. The intention was to enhance the development of 'mentalization' in direct practice in contrasting social work roles. Practice educators for the Project student group were introduced to the approach at an AFC-led briefing session in October 2014, at the start of the placement. A second full-day workshop for this cohort of Educators alongside the student group was run in April 2015. This workshop was intended to:

- explore ways of integrating 'mentalization' in practice supervision with opportunities provided for live supervision discussion;

- enable students and Practice Educators to reflect on the extent to which they had been willing and able to integrate learning about 'mentalization' into day to day practice.

A further workshop was offered as part of the Annual Practice Educator Conference put on each January by the University. This enabled a wider constituency of Practice Educators to be briefed about the approach. A 'work discussion' group offered to support Practice Educators with Project students on placement did not take place as intended, due to work pressures in agencies. This meant that learning reinforcement in placement could not be relied on to support this process as it was in the TMVIP groups.

### **University of East Anglia (UEA)**

During the first year of the Project, students in the study cohort received additional teaching on mentalization as part of 'Relationship-Based Practice.' During the autumn semester, students attended a series of workshops which encouraged them to focus on the relationship between cognition, emotion and behaviour in their professional practice. This series included the workshop led by Minna Daum and Nicola Labushagne from the Anna Freud Centre (AFC) in November 2013.

This day was attended not only by the MA and BA student cohort but also by practice educators and a number of UEA social work lecturers to increase the shared understanding of the language and concept of mentalization as applied to social work practice. In order to support learning from the material delivered during the workshop, a mentalization briefing document was prepared by Laura Cook (the basis of Chapter 2 above) which distilled theory for practice and key learning points from the teaching day.

For the second workshop in Year One, (February 2014), after an introduction from Minna Daum and Nicola Labushagne, students were divided into a number of small groups facilitated by AFC and UEA staff. Prior to the workshop, students were asked to come prepared to introduce a case a) they had worked on during placement and b) had written about as the subject of a Record of Practice Analysis (RPA), which forms part of their placement assessment. They were asked to identify a case which they found particularly emotive, hard to make sense of, or where there were issues that took some time to work out. Following the case presentation, the small group discussions addressed the following areas:

- how the student made sense of what the service user was thinking or feeling, based on their behaviour

- the student's own emotional reaction to the case and how that influenced their thinking/how they managed that aspect
- organisational aspects of the work, such as supervision, resources, caseload, culture of the team and how those had an impact on their thoughts and feelings about the service user

The third AFC workshop led by Minna Daum and Nicola Labushagne was timed for February 2015 to take advantage of the students being well embedded in their second placements which began in September 2014. In order to build on previous teaching relevant to MBSW on the programme and in the previous AFC workshops, this training session moved on from an emphasis on encounters with service users and focused on organisational aspects of mentalization, with an emphasis on how professionals' feeling and thinking about cases in professional teams and networks can impact on their practice behaviours, on case management and on outcomes.

The aims of the third AFC teaching session were therefore to:

- a) Enhance students' understanding of / capacity for mentalization in an organizational context, by encouraging them to make links between case material (including from their placements) and mentalization.
- b) Increase students' knowledge of, and capacity for, inter-professional working

The training day commenced with a refresher from Minna Daum and Nicola Labushagne of the concept of mentalization specifically in relation to the professional network. There was a focus on the way in which cases can engender emotional responses in professionals and, in turn, how these emotions might push professionals into certain actions or styles of engagement with the service user and the wider professional network.

Using illustrative case material from the Early Years Parenting Unit, Minna and Nicola described how unprocessed emotional responses on the part of professionals can create 'splits' within the team around the service user/ family. Such splitting can result in lack of communication between professionals, delay in decision-making and service users receiving conflicting messages or advice from professionals. The facilitators described a 'resolved' case in order to illustrate how social workers might acknowledging emotional impacts affecting the team, and work towards resolving 'splits' within the professional network.



In the second-half of the morning, students engaged in facilitated small group work. Students were provided with a case referral from the EYPU and were invited to consider their initial responses to the referral, and as a result, how they might approach initial engagement with the family and professional network. Following feedback from the groups, Minna and Nicola outlined how the case proceeded and how difficulties in the professional network were identified, acknowledged and resolved.

In the afternoon session, students were invited to discuss their own case material in small groups. For each of the cases they were asked to consider a) their emotions in relation to the case b) the emotions that they thought professional network or team experienced in relation to the case, c) how organisation aspects of the work (e.g. supervision/caseload/team culture) may have impacted on their thoughts and feelings about the case and, d) how they felt that these factors combined to impact on the outcome of the case.

This final training day concluded with feedback to the larger group in relation to the exercise and, more broadly, the students' thoughts on how team cultures and organisational environments might impact on mentalization, decision-making and practice behaviour.

## **4. Project evaluation methodology**

### **Introduction**

An evaluation assesses the effectiveness of a policy or intervention - for whom, how and why. If an intervention is being introduced for the first time, then the process of implementation is also the subject of investigation if there is to be a question of further piloting or rolling out the intervention more widely. The introduction of 'mentalization' into social work education is a complex intervention, with multiple aspects and multiple actors, which in this Project was being investigated across two sites with rather different programmes. Alongside new programme content on 'mentalization' provided directly by the Anna Freud Centre staff, Minna Daum and Nichola de Labuschagne, there were related topics on the existing curriculum at both Universities, such as psychodynamic teaching on human growth and behaviour; aspects of the preparation for practice skills teaching; relationship based social work; reflective practice; reflections on practice in placement reports - some of which were also modified and enhanced as part of this project.

While ‘mentalization-based’ therapy is not new, ‘mentalization’ as a practice construct in social work is emergent, with both the concept and applications in practice emerging as part of this project. This added an additional layer of complexity to the intervention, its implementation and evaluation.

### **The evaluation design**

There are different types of evaluation method depending on the purpose of the evaluation; perhaps the most important basic distinction is between *formative* and *summative* evaluation. If the purpose of the evaluation is to identify progress or improve current provision, this is best undertaken as the service/intervention progresses. This is known as ‘formative evaluation’ e.g. it helps to form/shape development of the service. The type of evaluation that looks at outcomes and effectiveness is termed ‘summative’. It is arguable that this evaluation was both ‘formative’ in terms of collecting data on methods for introducing new theories into social work practice and ‘summative’ in terms of assessing impact on outcomes.

In this way it is consistent with contemporary approaches to service innovation, where the piloting of conceptually promising models enables their efficacy and effectiveness to be tested together through implementation in practice (Epstein & Klerman, 2013). In this case the promising model brought together an emergent theory of social work relationships (‘mentalization’) with a developmental approach to curriculum enhancement.

### **Formative evaluation**

For this project, some aspects of the evaluation of the implementation process as well as curriculum changes reflected usual practice on qualifying programmes e.g. students were invited to complete evaluations of teaching events. There were also additional opportunities to reflect on their overall experience of this aspect of their programme e.g. at Sussex in a discussion group at which Anna Freud Centre staff were present and at UEA through a focus group of students, which was recorded and transcribed. This was in addition to the usual regular meetings which both universities’ staff were holding with students at which discussion of all aspects of their programmes, including MBSW, could be discussed.

As a partnership project, there were also regular meetings between staff from the Anna Freud Centre, Sussex and UEA which provided additional opportunities to reflect on progress and plan next steps.

### **Summative evaluation: the outcomes framework**

Since the evaluation aimed to explore impact, it was important to define which outcomes we considered relevant in order to identify the impact of the project on student knowledge and performance. Although defining outcomes was important for this project as research, the consideration of outcome measurement was also part of a general wish to learn about how 'mentalizing' and related practice skills might be tested and assessed as part of a qualifying programme.

There is a growing recognition that the lack of an established body of knowledge on learning outcomes achieved by differing approaches to social work education undermines effective decision-making about course structure and curriculum development (Carpenter, 2011). Research attention in the UK has now turned to the development of methodologies that address much more directly the policy demand, that social work education can be shown especially to improve skill and effectiveness in direct practice as part of the full range of 'meta-' and 'procedural' competencies required by the professional role (Maxwell et al., 2016; Bogo, 2011). The learning outcomes framework developed for the current study is consistent with this shift in focus. Several direct practice methodologies are now being explored as candidates for embedding in social work curricula and agency practice alike (Department for Education, 2016). In the study reported here the aim was to develop a measure for testing the enhancement of student capacity to 'mentalize', understood as an evidence-based approach to 'reflective functioning', where that was the explicit intention of curriculum design.

## **5. Evaluation findings**

### **Introduction**

The whole population of students in the selected course cohorts at both Sussex and UEA were able to benefit from the opportunity provided by the Project to understand the role of 'mentalization' in social work and to begin to develop their capacity and skill in practice. This allowed for routine methods of course evaluation of the overall student experience of teaching and learning to be employed and enhanced for the purpose of Project formative or process evaluation. Students chose whether to take part in the summative aspect of the evaluation in both sites.

### **Formative/process evaluation findings**

#### **Overall**

In both sites the AFC teaching input described in the previous chapter was valued highly or very highly overall, at each point at which student feedback was invited. This was the case whether or not the learning experience had been experienced as challenging by students, as it often was. Although no standardized measures were used for this aspect of evaluation, there was no indication either that the core design logic of the project was faulty. In the light of this feedback it can be said that the intention to embed the expert practitioner-led teaching and group work provided by AFC colleagues into existing curriculum models in each site proved to be the right approach, at least in principle. In each case students engaged actively and reflectively for the most part with the learning opportunities provided and much more often than not with significant enthusiasm. This was the case especially with the AFC workshop programme itself, which represented the core offer for students. Where attempts were made to enable the transfer and integration of workshop learning into practice placement settings, and to involve Practice Educators in this process, evidence of success was less apparent.

#### **University of Sussex**

Student feedback on the workshop sequence in the first project year (2013-2014) was strongly validating of the teaching and learning approach, in which practice examples from the AFC EYPU formed the basis of understanding the challenge posed by the 'mentalization' stance. Overwhelmingly positive feedback from the first workshop (March 2014) was explained by the link that could be made in workshop discussion between theoretical and research-based teaching on 'mentalization' in HDSR and SAAR modules, TMVIP group learning and initial practice experience in the social work role in

the first placement. The timing of the first workshop was appreciated, being consistent with the developmental and concurrent approach to learning for and in practice embodied in course design. Not only was the core theory 'refreshed' but it was made 'relatable and relevant to placement'. Students praised the qualities of the trainers and their use of personal experience, honesty, use of humour and their application of practice examples in a direct and meaningful way. The quality of presentation, facilitation, content and use of materials was judged by students as either 'excellent' or 'good'. Students appreciated the use of video and case studies which made key concepts 'live'. It enabled students to further understand attachment styles and parenting; how to work with non-compliance and difficult to engage parents and hypothesise about their own mental states and those of the families they are working with. Attachment theory and research, psycho-social approaches to generating hypotheses about the meaning and significance of behavior, the core tensions embodied in the professional value base could all be given practical expression. In this way the practitioner-led, workshop mode of teaching and learning made the theories and concepts 'more accessible' than they had been previously. Both during the workshop and on reflection students were able to give various examples of how learning from the workshop might make a difference to their practice. At this stage reflection was still largely speculative, with the first placement having only got underway some six weeks previously. Examples were given at this stage of the use of the learning in thinking more thoroughly about 'attachment styles' and parenting, the care/authority dichotomy and working with non-compliance through the helping relationship between worker and service user. The capacity to 'think about cases from a new perspective' and to 'step back and avoid splitting' was cited in this respect, for example. Using observation of parent-child dynamics through the lens of 'mentalization', and recognizing one's own mental state in the moment and its impact on the relationship were grasped as key capabilities. Having difficulties in working with people 'because of my own feelings' could be named with greater confidence now that the teaching had confirmed the legitimacy of such feelings. While students reported in these ways whether or not their current placement was in 'child and family' or 'adult' social work roles and service settings, by this stage they were less likely to consider the ways in which the agency system and professional relationships formed within it could be informed also by a 'mentalization' perspective.

Feedback from the second workshop in May 2014 was congruent with the stage reached by group members in their personal and professional learning. Taking place at the point when final practice placement assessment was underway, this session triggered

significant conflict between key group members about the legitimate use of authority in the professional role. It was apparent here that allowing only a half-day was a mistake, where case presentations from the AFC and student placements alike might well have been predicted to stir up fears in students of being ineffective in practice or getting things wrong at this stage of the course. Ways of working effectively and legitimately with the reported frustration of 'failing' to elicit change in client behavior in risky situations were not addressed fully in the session. On this occasion the process by which tensions in the learning environment are expected to be worked on by students and tutors, through TMVIP groups, was not engaged and remained unresolved. Instead, communication between some members of the student group remained tense and oppositional, affecting other aspects of student performance. The decision was taken by AFC trainers and Sussex workshop leads to reconvene the workshop to complete business which seemed to be unfinished. At the half-day workshop in October 2014 the differences surfacing previously and yet to be settled were re-engaged using the additional time now made available. Unsurprisingly, student feedback following this follow-on workshop was particularly positive. Significant learning had been facilitated by this process of modelling the 'mentalization' of relationships across parts of the student group which had become 'stuck' in a pattern of avoidance and displacement of the matter in hand. This was to do once again with the difficulty of using professional authority with integrity in the context of risk. Once again people were reminded that time and careful leadership is needed if professional learning that matters most is to be achieved.

In the second Project year (2014-2015) student feedback focused most on the extent to which learning about 'mentalization' was supported effectively in the final 100 placement period. The Project as implemented was less directly successful in this respect. While students continued to develop their understanding of and capabilities in 'mentalization' in practice, through weekly in-depth case discussions in TMVIP, the difficulty faced by Practice Educators in finding time to become actively involved in the Project diminished the opportunity to consolidate learning more directly in practice. While the joint workshop in April 2015 enabled experience of supervision to be explored in depth, alongside a small minority of Practice Educators, the intention to run parallel 'work discussion' groups for the whole cohort of Practice Educators was not achieved. Student reflection on embedding 'mentalization' in the supervisory relationship, at the April 2015 workshop and subsequently in feedback, focused to an extent on familiar concerns about the way supervision had become centred on ensuring

procedural compliance, in the context of pervasive anxiety about the implications of failure on both sides. This affected supervisory relationships on placement too. 'Mentalization-based' approaches to developing 'whole team' and 'team around the worker' models of supervision appeared attractive in this context. In the event, it became apparent that the Project itself had not enabled that approach to be explored in a sustained way in the practice placements themselves. This raised the larger question about the best strategy for aligning the key teaching role of Practice Educators more effectively within the overall curriculum. The model of concurrent practice teaching and learning employed at Sussex means that tensions inherent in the triangular practice development and assessment relationship formed by the student, TMVIP tutor and Practice Educator need careful attention in any case if anxiety and conflict about performance and its validation are to be contained and channelled effectively. The Project provided a reminder that further work would be necessary in support of the 'team around the student' formed across agency boundaries (HEI and placement agency), if new practice methodologies were to become embedded effectively as intended. Once again the 'mentalization' model was as useful in understanding the learning process in the organisational context as it was in informing direct practice relationships themselves.

On the conclusion of the Project in May 2015 a focus group was held by Sussex faculty with those students who had opted into the summative, outcome evaluation. The integration of workshop teaching in the course curriculum as a whole, including that provided by the AFC on 'mentalization', continued to dominate thinking. This resulted in further discussion amongst course leads about what it is that is being developed in a 'practice development workshop'. Student experience of the Project confirms established understanding in social work education that learning for professional practice is most effective when teaching designed to enhance skill acquisition addresses at the same time the personal capacity of students to manage the emotional and ethical challenges engaged by the exercise of the social work role. The Project worked best for students where these challenges were surfaced in the moment by teaching materials, case material, personal accounts and the like and then worked on in and beyond the dedicated workshop sessions. Students cautioned that group members who were minded to avoid the level of personal engagement necessary for effective learning might be able still to do so, especially where reinforcement in TMVIP groups, other taught modules and in placement was not achieved. Students thought the 'mentalization' approach to practice capability and skill was particularly susceptible to avoidance,

because of the direct nature of the challenge it posed to social work practice undertaken from a more defensive stance.

### **University of East Anglia (UEA)**

Student feedback on the first AFC Project Workshop provided by Minna Daum and Nicola Labushagne in November 2013 was very positive indeed, with participants identifying the teaching as 'brilliant' and 'captivating'. A large number of participants identified the case examples as the most useful part of the teaching day; they particularly valued Minna and Nicola sharing 'real-life' cases they had worked on. Video clips were also identified as useful, helping the students to unpick and apply the concept of mentalization.

Almost all participants suggested that the session would help with their practice in some way. Most commented specifically on how the session had led them to consider their own emotions, and how emotions might relate to their practice. Participants commented that they would be more 'self-aware' and 'discuss feelings more' as a result. Participants also seemed to be suggesting that the session had given them 'permission' (our wording) to acknowledge their own feelings in response to their work. They commented that it was positive for them to feel that negative feelings could be 'validated' were 'okay' to have and 'vocalise' or 'talk about in supervision'. This was modelled by Minna and Nicola's frank discussion of occasions in their work when they had experienced difficult emotions. One participant commented 'Honesty of own feelings by Minna and Nicola was refreshing'. Participants also commented on the value of considering mentalization in terms of the professional network.

UEA staff feedback was that the teaching material had sparked lively discussion from participants. The way in which the case material was delivered served as a useful model for students and PEs in thinking about emotion in relation to professional judgement. The presenters openly discussed occasions when they had found a case emotionally demanding, had become 'stuck' and found it difficult to mentalize. Perhaps it was for this reason that during the afternoon discussion, some students offered some of their own tentative reflections on how it felt to be uncertain or experience negative emotions in relation to the work. Understandably, it can be challenging for students (particularly those in their first year of training) to admit to vulnerability or 'not knowing' in relation to their cases, particularly in the university environment where they may be being assessed and feel under pressure to present the 'answer.'



One of the ongoing challenges and discussion points in relation to the teaching of mentalization is how students can be encouraged to 'stay with' or tolerate a degree of uncertainty in case discussions, without feeling under undue pressure to immediately 'solve the case.' In this sense, part of implementing teaching on mentalization is also equipping student social workers with the ability to fully assess a situation – a skill they will need going into practice.

The material on the professional network (and the way in which professional networks can lose the capacity to mentalize) was particularly fruitful in terms of student and PE discussion. The presenters provided a useful visual representation of the professional network, with areas shaded to designate the views/alliances and relationships between professionals. This visual representation provided an accessible way into 'mentalizing the split' in the professional network where cases have become intractably 'stuck.' In the small group discussions, students and PEs shared their experiences of difficulties they had experienced in working collaboratively with professionals.

The question of how to facilitate teaching environments which allow students to be uncertain, and at times vulnerable, was re-visited in the planning of the second workshop (February 2014). The small group discussion format provided a fruitful opportunity for students to consider the relationship between emotion, cognition and behavior in social work practice early in their first placement. As would be expected, there were individual variations in students' capacity to mentalize service users' experiences, their own professional behaviour and that of the professional network. But many students were able to consider how their own mental states might influence their judgement as a result of the case discussion.

The facilitator of one seminar group commented that it seemed more difficult for students to think through the mental states of other professionals than it was to consider service users' experiences, especially when they had experienced difficulties with another professional. It may be that at this stage in their learning, students are more familiar with the idea of trying to put themselves 'in the shoes' of service users, rather than other professionals. Again, the concept of mentalization raised interesting questions about the teaching of interprofessional practice, and how we assist students in their understanding of the emotional barriers to communication between professionals.

In some groups it seemed challenging to stay with mental states and there was a tendency to seek more information about a case from the presenter, resulting in deferring mentalization. A few strategies seemed to assist with this issue:

- Asking students to come up with 'emotion words' immediately after listening to the case presentation. This seemed to partially reduce the tendency to reach for 'procedural' or 'problem-solving' responses to the case.
- Reassurance that there are no 'right' answers or neat solutions. This reassurance helped to 'free up' students to consider multiple potential meanings of behaviours.
- Discouraging requests for further information. The presenter was briefed not to answer any questions from the group after they had presented. This compelled the rest of the group to think through the information they had been given, rather than seeking to elicit more description.
- Asking students to 'put themselves in the mind' of other professionals in the network e.g. questions such as: 'What might they be thinking/feeling?' or 'How might the case appear from their perspective?' 'What might they see that you don't?'

Student feedback and facilitator reflections were both positive regarding the third AFC workshop (February 2015), which focussed on organizational aspects of mentalization. During the small group discussions students drew on their own practice experience without prompting, drawing parallels with 'difficult' cases they had experienced. With prompting, students were able to consider how their emotional responses to the case might impact on their practice behaviour. For instance, when asked how receiving such a referral would make them feel, they said that they might feel anxious or perhaps hopeless in the face of a case which had a long history of previous social care involvement. With prompting, they were able to identify how these feelings might shape what they did next. For instance, a feeling of being 'overwhelmed' might lead them to make lots of referrals to other agencies. Similarly, a sense of 'urgency' based on the perception that the children were at immediate risk might make a professional feel that they wanted to 'charge in' and 'fix it.' Fear was linked with going in with 'your guard up' in terms of engagement with the family. A recurring theme throughout the discussion

was the issue of how care and authority are integrated within professional practice, a theme emphasised by Minna Daum.

During the afternoon session, students drew on their own experiences to explore ideas around interprofessional working. The students' experience in more than one placement setting allowed them to compare and contrast different organisational climates in terms of mentalization/emotional containment. Students named some of the ways through they had been able to overcome conflict between professionals e.g. between adult and children's services. A particular area of interest was the way in which students talked about frustration when 'waiting for something to happen' with a case. The perception seemed to be that sometimes, despite professionals 'knowing' that there was a risk, there wasn't enough 'evidence' or that the case didn't meet 'threshold'. Professionals seemed to be placed in a position of limbo; waiting for further 'concrete events' to unfold. The group discussion allowed this to be explored further, and it was useful to return to the case presentation given by Minna and Nicola earlier in the day.

At the end of the Project a student focus group was held. The initial discussion about the mentalization based teaching focused on the importance of integrating this way of thinking into a growing framework of other ideas and theories that they were acquiring during the course, such attachment theory and relationship based practice.

There was said to have been a benefit of learning early on in the programme that being a social worker meant having a range of feelings about service users that needed to be acknowledged and managed. As one student commented:

*Actually it was quite nice to have someone say that it is okay to feel negative about someone you are working with. In my first placement I had a lot of frustration with one of my service users and I took it to supervision all the time and I felt bad for feeling it and that (teaching) kind of made me understand why I was feeling it and it gave me a completely different perspective on the case and the feelings went away because I acknowledged it and accepted it and then was able to move on.*

Also a powerful source of learning commented on by students was the focus on mentalization applied to organisations. There were a number of specific concepts that had struck a chord.

*They talked about splitting quite a lot in the mentalization sessions and I found that really useful for my practice, because I was on placement with a child protection team and there was quite a lot of splitting.*

Given these complex situations in cases and in teams, the mentalization teaching had also made students think about their need for good supervision - and students reflected on the great difference between placements with good supervision and those without.

As the programme progressed, it had become more possible to see where mentalization fitted with other teaching.

*I think the reflective things we did really helped and linked with mentalization... so we had our role play and reflected on the role play...and our child observation had an element of reflection and our case study and RPAs (Records of Practice Analysis).*

Students also commented on the new questions on thoughts feelings and behaviour in the Records of Practice Analysis (RPAs) that were linked to the mentalization project. One student commented on her concern about doing six RPAs, but said

*...actually they were a moment when I could think 'Why did they think, why did they behave like that and why did I behave like that?' ....doing an RPA was like supervision for me.*

The view in the focus group was that new teaching, such as on mentalization, needs to be processed over time and integrated with other teaching and placement experiences. Reflection on practice placement case material and their own direct experience of social work practice are a central part of learning new concepts that needs to be reflected in assessment material.

### ***Summative evaluation***

The summative evaluation aimed to look at the outcomes and effectiveness of the implementation of mentalization-based teaching into the curriculum. This evaluation used a repeated measures design, students were asked to respond to the same vignettes once towards the beginning of their social work studies, and once at the end. The students' responses were coded using a coding manual developed as part of this project.

The research design would not enable us to establish a causal connection between the changes made in the curriculum to incorporate mentalization based teaching and any increase in students' capacity to mentalize at the end of the course. To do that would have required a control group on the course who experienced 'business as usual' without the input from the Anna Freud Centre. This was not feasible during the timescale of the project, as we wanted all students to benefit from the additional teaching. However, the design did aim to establish whether the social work students demonstrated an increased ability to mentalize at the end of their qualifying training in social work, compared to the beginning. The research questions were as follows:

1. Does the capacity to mentalize differ between social work contexts? (in this case child and family/adult mental health)
2. Do students show an improvement in mentalization at the end of their qualifying training compared with at the beginning?

### ***Data collection***

Data was collected at two universities from student cohorts at two time points (T1 and T2) towards the beginning and towards the end of qualifying programmes. At UEA students were MA/BA students on the social work qualifying programmes. At T1 43 out of 46 students took part, a response rate of 93%, at T2 33 students took part, an attrition rate of 23%. At Sussex MA students on the qualifying programme were invited to take part. At T1 16 out of 23 took part, a response rate of 70%. At T2, 9 took part, an attrition rate of 44%.

Data collection arrangements were broadly similar across the two sites. However, there was local variation in the research process. At UEA the vignettes were treated as a dependent variable. Students undertook the vignette task at T1. They were not told it was a measure of mentalization, or debriefed afterwards. They then undertook the same

task at T2. At Sussex the vignettes were used as a developmental tool and students took part in a reflective session where they discussed their experience of responding to the vignette task after T1.

### ***Development of the measure of mentalization***

A key challenge for the research team was to develop a measure of mentalization relevant for student social workers. Extant measures, such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) provide a way of measuring capacity for reflective functioning (of which mentalization is a part), based on the scoring of an in-depth interview around the subject's early attachment experiences. However, as has been outlined in chapter two of this report, an individual's capacity for mentalization is situation and context dependent.

There were therefore two important considerations:

- an individual's capacity to mentalize in relation to their personal relationships may differ from their capacity to mentalize in relation to their professional relationships (i.e. with service users)
- an individual's capacity to mentalize may vary between practice contexts (for instance, a social worker may be more able to mentalize a parent's experiences than the child's)

For student social workers we aimed to measure their capacity to consider mental states specifically in relation to practice (rather than in relation to their own life experiences), and in relation to different practice contexts (i.e. adult and childcare settings).

The measure needed to be administered to a large cohort of students at a specific time point and specifically relevant to mentalization in relation to social work practice. Accordingly, two vignettes were administered at each time point. The vignettes were paper-based case practice scenarios which covered adult mental health and child and families social work. Vignette One depicted a childcare social work scenario in which a social worker visited a family at home where there were reported concerns over a child's behaviour. The scenario described ambiguous behaviours which could be interpreted with reference to a wide range of mental states. Students were asked to account for what they thought was 'going on' at key moments during the events depicted in the scenario e.g. when the mother started to cry. The vignette was worded in such a way as to invite accounts which drew on the mental states of each of the

characters, including the social worker. Vignette Two depicted an adult mental health social work scenario, in which a service user's discharge was being considered at a meeting, in the presence of the service user's mother. As with the first vignette, students were asked to account for what they thought was 'going on' at key moments in the scenario, such as the service user beginning 'to shout'. Again, the vignette was worded in such a way that it was possible to imagine multiple hypotheses for the behaviour of each of the characters, including the social worker.

The vignettes were then coded using a coding guide developed for this project. The existing Reflective-Functioning Scoring Manual for assessing the Adult Attachment Interview (Fonagy, Target, Steele & Steele, 1998) and The Addendum to Reflective Functioning Manual (Fonagy, Steele, Steele & Target, 1998) used to score the Parent Development Interview were adapted for use in this context. During the first stage of the development process, four key domains from the RF measure were adapted as a way to measure student's written responses to the vignettes:

#### *1. Variety and complexity of mental states*

This domain captured the degree of richness in the students' description of the mental states of the characters in the practice scenarios and measured the extent to which student social workers were able to imaginatively hypothesise a range of both cognitive and affective mental states for each character in the scenario. Students received lower scores where they demonstrated a teleological stance, for instance, using professional jargon or focusing on a diagnostic label, rather than mental states in order to explain the behaviour of the characters depicted in the scenario.

#### *2. Plausible attribution of mental states*

This domain captured the extent to which students' hypotheses about the mental states of the characters were convincing, based on the information given in the scenario. Students received lower scores where they demonstrated biased or distorted accounts of what the characters might be thinking and/or feeling. Higher scores were achieved where students' accounts of the characters' mental states were specific to the events described in the vignettes and provided a coherent overall narrative.

### *3. Opacity and uncertainty in attributing mental states*

This domain captured the extent to which the student was able to accept that mental states are inherently 'unknowable', and evidence their understanding that there might be alternative (and competing) explanations for behaviour. Students received lower scores where they were 'concrete' in their thinking, giving fixed and definite accounts of the mental states of the characters. Higher scores were given where students were able to adopt a stance of 'uncertainty', offering multiple hypotheses for the behaviours described in the scenario.

### *4. Linking of mental states within the scenario*

This domain captured the extent to which students were able to demonstrate an awareness of the interconnectedness of mental states between individuals. Students were awarded a higher score where they were able to consider how the mental state of one character in the scenario might impact on the thoughts and feelings of another character. Students received a lower score where the mental states of the characters were considered in isolation.

When the research team attempted to apply this adapted measure to the vignettes, it became evident that another domain was necessary in order to fully capture the social work practice aspect of the measure. Thus a fifth domain was added:

### *5. Consideration of the mental states of the social worker*

This domain sought to capture the extent to which the student social worker was able to consider the mental states of the social worker depicted in the scenario. Students were awarded a higher score where they were able to consider how the social worker in the scenario might think and feel in response to the other characters. Students were given a lower score where they conceived the social worker in a 'robotic' sense e.g. in a solely task-focused, or procedural fashion.

### ***Reliability***

The initial coding guide was created by researchers from the Anna Freud Centre (Asquith and Slead). Meetings were held with researchers from both universities to refine the coding manual and to train university coders. The process of testing for interrater reliability was as follows. There were three independent coders of the vignettes. In phase I the second and third coders received training from the first coder



(AFC) who was experienced in coding using the PDI/AAI and had initially developed the coding system. Each coder jointly coded 6 cases which led to further refinement of the coding system. Phase II: Following training each of the three coders independently coded an additional 18 vignettes, 9 from the child and family scenario and nine from the adult mental health scenario. Intra-class correlations (ICCs) for the three coders were computed and are shown in Table One. All scales yielded acceptable ICCs indicating very strong agreement between the three coders. Based on this, the three coders went on to code the remainder of the sample. All coding was done after T2 so that coders were not aware of the time point of the responses they were coding.

Scale	ICCs	95% confidence interval
Variety	.88	.74-.95
Plausibility	.84	.65-.94
Opacity	.87	.69-.95
Linking	.88	.71-.95
Social worker mentalization	.9	.77-.96
Total scores	.91	.76-.97

*Table One: Intra-class Correlations for the five domains of the Coding Scale*

The internal consistency of the scale was tested using Cronbach's alpha to examine how closely related the domains were as a group. Cronbach's alpha at T1 for the Child and Family vignette was .89. The reliability of the scale would not improve if any of the first four domains (variety, plausibility, opacity and linking) were removed from the measure. If 'social worker mentalization' was removed Cronbach's alpha would improve marginally to .91. A similar process was followed for the adult mental health vignette. All domains were significantly correlated with each other (again the correlations for domain five were slightly lower). Cronbach's alpha was .89. All the domains were therefore kept in the measure.

### **Findings**

RQ1: Does the capacity to mentalize differ between social work contexts? (e.g. child and family/adult mental health)

*Hypothesis:* There will be a positive correlation between scores on the child and family social work vignette and scores on the adult mental health vignette.

A Pearson Correlation coefficient was calculated at T1 to assess the relationship between the total scores for the child and family vignette and the total score for the adult mental health vignette. There was a positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .68$ ,  $n = 42$ ,  $p \leq .01$ . Higher scores for the child and family scenario were correlated with higher scores for the adult mental health scenario.

RQ2: Are students better at mentalizing at the end of their qualifying programme in social work compared with at the beginning?

Hypothesis: Students will score higher on the measure of mentalization at T2 than they do at T1.

Each domain on the coding guide was scored between 1 and 5. The range of possible scores for each vignette was therefore 5-25. The sum of both vignettes was also calculated and the range of possible scores was 10-50. Because of differences in the way the vignette task was administered across the two sites a comparison of scores at T1 and T2 was carried out on the UEA data ( $n = 33$ ). The following findings apply to that site only.

Paired sample t-tests were performed to compare differences in means at T1 and T2 between scores for each vignette and for the total scores. There was no significant difference in the scores for the child and family vignette at T1 ( $M = 13.42$ ,  $SD = 3.92$ ) and T2 ( $M = 13.67$ ,  $SD = 4.44$ );  $T = -.27$ ,  $p \leq .79$ . Similarly, there was no significant difference in the scores for the adult mental health vignette at T1 ( $M = 14.67$ ,  $SD = 4.46$ ) and T2 ( $M = 13.76$ ,  $SD = 4.05$ );  $T = 1.05$ ,  $p \leq .3$ . There was no significant difference in the total scores for T1 ( $M = 28.06$ ,  $SD = 8.26$ ) and T2 ( $M = 27.42$ ,  $SD = 7.23$ );  $T = .41$ ,  $p \leq .68$ .

### ***Discussion***

The use of the vignettes and the development of the measure of 'mentalization' was exploratory. The vignettes generated responses of varying complexity and sophistication and coders were able to achieve a high degree of interrater reliability in applying the coding system. The results appear to suggest that students who are good at 'mentalizing' in relation to one context (child and family social work) will also be good at 'mentalizing' in another (adult mental health). The results also appear to suggest that students' ability to 'mentalize' does not increase over the course of the social work

qualifying programme. If this is the case there could be several explanations – it may be that the programme was not well designed to facilitate changes in ‘mentalization’, or it could be that ‘mentalization’ is not amenable to change easily.

However, the development of the measure was an exploratory part of the project and caution must therefore be exercised in interpreting the results. The validity of the measure was not tested. To explore validity participants’ responses to a vignette could be compared with a ‘real world’ demonstration of ‘mentalization’ skills – the latter might be measured by consulting with tutors/practice educators who know the participants and are judged to be skilled in assessing mentalization, or by observing and recording practice and coding ‘mentalization’ directly.

Reflection on research design reveals relevant differences between the data collection for which the original coding manual for reflective function was developed, and the data collected during this project. First, there may be differences between an interviewee reflecting on an *actual* relationship (with a parent or a child) and a student reflecting on a *hypothetical* situation. It might be expected that reflection on an actual relationship would trigger a stronger emotional reaction than reflection on a hypothetical situation, and that this might affect the response.

Secondly, the original coding manual was developed to code a verbal interview rather than a short written response. Variations in literacy skills may affect the latter. There are also differences between the questions asked in an interview, and written questions following a vignette, not least in the number of questions asked. Fonagy et al (1998, p.37) discuss the importance of identifying a set of questions most likely to elicit an explanation in terms of mental states when applying the principles of the manual to other research interviews, and make a distinction between demand questions (which are more explicit in requiring a response in terms of mental states) and permit questions (which allow such a response but do not require it). It may be that altering or supplementing the questions in the vignettes would generate different results. Alternatively, students could be interviewed about the vignette to gain richer data which could then be coded.

Third, there are differences in the coding process. Using the Reflective Functioning manual the rater comes to an overall rating of the interview not by summing the ratings coded within the interview, or by calculating the average rating, but by coming to a

judgement about the whole interview and assigning it one number on a scale between -1 and +9. This is a very different process to that undertaken in the current project where students were given a score which was the sum of the scores on each of five domains.

The development of the measure was an innovative and exploratory part of the project. Further work would be necessary to test the validity of the measure and to further examine the scoring system used. However, the vignettes and the coding guide were promising as they allowed coders to reliably discriminate between responses high and low in 'mentalization'.

Whilst the project did not establish a reliable and valid measure of mentalization in social work education, there could be potential to use the vignette and coding guide within social work education. It might be useful to use this type of vignette and analysis for recruitment and admissions to social work programmes. Applicants could be asked to undertake the written task, and then to discuss at interview. A second possibility would be to use the vignettes and coding guide with students as a teaching tool to develop their understanding of 'mentalization', and facilitate reflective evaluation of their practice. A further possibility would be to refine the coding guide and use it to assist assessment of students' reflective writing and quality of reflective presentations.

## **6. Conclusions and implications for social work education**

The overall conclusion to draw from this account is one of cautious optimism. Project design was such that no robust comparison could be made with regard to learning outcomes achieved by students in the respective cohorts at each university or between those students and others who had not experienced the enhanced teaching and learning. Nonetheless, the project did enable teaching and learning about one distinctive, evidence-informed practice capability and skill, 'mentalization', to be enhanced within existing curriculum structures through a novel collaboration between expert practitioners and social work faculty. Customary methods of formative evaluation of student experience and learning, through self-report and informal faculty observation, confirmed high level of engagement could be achieved with a 'relationship-based' method of social work that was practically, ethically and emotionally challenging.

Further work would be necessary to adapt existing research measures of 'mentalizing' capacity validated in other practice settings for the purpose of researching the quality of social work 'reflective functioning'. Progress was made towards developing a reliable measure of mentalization in social work education, although the validity of the measure was not tested. However, the process of designing, administering and evaluating the measure provided a sound basis for further thinking about curriculum design and the development of bespoke measures for 'mentalization' in the social work context. Potential uses of the specific case vignettes and accompanying coding guide within social work education were suggested.

In the meantime, focused engagement with the concept of mentalization was valued highly by students as a component of their social work training. Mentalization-based teaching, supported by inputs from the AFC team, helped students to reflect on the experiences of service users, as well as the role of their own emotions in shaping their professional judgement and practice behavior. Mentalization provided a way for students to voice their anxieties about being a new social worker (such as exercising authority as part of their role, the fear of 'getting it wrong'), and acted as a lens through which to consider their experiences within their placement. The concept of mentalization helped students to understand the dynamics within their placement organisations, as well as to potentially challenge existing practice (for example the provision of procedural rather than reflective supervision).

Consistent with pedagogic expectations at each university, this engagement was not uncritical, providing further evidence that both the practice method itself and the way it was presented were effective in generating serious and sustained interest. This dynamic

of critical engagement was evident too at the seminar held in February 2016 for social work educators and others, where the project was described and outline findings from the summative evaluation reported. Would this distinctive approach to social work assessment and intervention in a multi-professional context prove successful in advancing further an integrative 'psychosocial' account of relationship-based practice? Does it hold the potential to refresh and extend more familiar accounts of the function of 'reflection' in practice derived from the humanistic or insight-based, psychodynamic approaches so well-known already in social work? Can it be more successful still in enabling social workers to understand and show how emotionally and socially unequal and depriving relationships in and beyond the family generate harmful individual states of mind and behavior? Might the direct methods of mentalization with service users made vulnerable or harmed in these ways enhance the impact of practice, where approaches based on empathy, insight and practical support alone seem persistently to fall short?

The tentative suggestion at this stage is that it might. It has long been a tradition of the best psychosocial social work education to enable students to understand in depth, and case by case, how individual states of mind and the behavior they generate are accounted for substantively by the quality and impact of the social relationships available to children and adults. Mentalization is a theoretically robust and empirically supported relationship-based construct which provides social work with an additional account of how thinking can get stuck and behavior remain unproductive in practice.

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