Case study 'Anya', evidence 6: Reflective account 3 - Professional development

When I first started the ASYE I was unsure about whether I was operating as a social worker, since I am employed in the capacity of a support worker.

Supervision with Laura has provided me with the opportunity to reflect on this. I have been able to recognise how, as a registered social worker, I bring something unique to the role of support worker. Laura has encouraged me to look at the international definition of social work, which has enabled me to recognise that I had developed an overly narrow view of social work - seeing it as simply a local authority role.

I will use this reflective account to draw out key excerpts from the international definition of the profession which enabled me to recognise why what I do is clearly "social work" in this wider sense:

*The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.*

This first sentence of the definition enabled me to see that social work is about much more than specific procedures and practice. This has enabled me to look at the PCF as a professional rather than occupational framework, recognising that if I am carrying out work which is reflected in the international definition then I can progress effectively as a social worker.

*Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments.*

Social work theory is not high on the agenda at NEDAS. However, I have begun to recognise the way that I have started to theorise on practice. Drawing on ideas from a range of theories about human behaviour, and particularly from a systems approach, I have been able to analyse situations more fully. For example, I have recognised how understanding theories like Karpman's drama triangle can help inform my understanding of people's circumstances (particularly in relation to why some of the women have entered abusive relationships on a number of occasions). I have also developed more of an understanding of how theory and models can be used in planning intervention strategies. For example, I have been able to make use of solution focused approaches to empower women to focus on their strengths and work towards solutions. I have also found the Duluth model of empowerment useful in structuring interventions.

*Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to*
develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice.

Reading this paragraph enabled me to reflect further on the way I have been drawing (probably subconsciously) on theories around change and the importance of change agents in systemic practice. The focus of all of my work - within the refuge and in outreach - is supporting women to make the changes that they want in their lives. At times, I have been challenged by my own values in relation to the two women I have worked with who returned to their abusive partners. I was able to reflect on this, recognising that these women were not ready to make the changes at that point in their lives and that I could enable them to keep options for their futures open. At times I have felt that some support workers have made judgements about women returning to abusive relationships and that maybe this is one area where my social work training has made a difference to my approach. Reflecting on these areas has helped me to recognise that social work is dynamic and complex and that all aspects of the PCF are therefore interrelated.

Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context.

My dissertation at university was about social work responses to trafficking. I have been able to draw on my knowledge of research evidence in this area while at the refuge. I was concerned specifically about whether some of the women coming to the refuge were vulnerable to internal trafficking and when one woman left her passport behind and went missing from the refuge I encouraged the service to follow this up in more detail with the police. I have been able to raise the profile of the risks of internal trafficking with support staff, raising consciousness about such an important and overlooked issue.

Social work responds to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems.

Often we are working with women at a time of crisis in their lives. I have begun to recognise that many of the support workers view the crisis stage as the initial move into the refuge. Once a woman is in the refuge and away from immediate danger some of the support workers seem to feel the ‘crisis’ is over and see the remainder of our work with women as very task-centred. I have started to recognise that the ‘crisis’ continues throughout the woman’s stay at the refuge and that aspects of solution focused practice can enable the woman and myself to plot their journey through the crisis period.

Conclusion

I found returning to the international definition of social work at this point really enlightening. I did study this at university in the early stages of my training, but since then have perhaps become overly focused on social work in local authorities.
Revisiting this definition has enabled me to see how what I am doing as a support worker is in fact social work. The exercise also aided my understanding of the PCF and the way that the domains are interrelated - in fact many of the domains are reflected in the definition.

Reading the definition also reminded me of social pedagogy as an approach and I have been able to reframe aspects of what I do as taking a pedagogical approach to practice. I have started to research the way that pedagogy is increasingly influencing practice in work with children and families in the UK. While this is a growing field of interest on a national level many local authority social workers do not get the opportunity to practice in this way, but I feel I am now in a position where I can develop skills for a pedagogical approach.