

## A Transformative Learning Approach to Child Protection with Applied Social Studies Undergraduates at a University in England

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Learning child protection requires more of students than simply understanding ‘what to do’ in legislative and policy terms. Students must reflect on their implicit belief systems to effectively respond to child protection concerns as future professionals. This is an instructional article describing a scenario-based survey methodology to increase students’ awareness of the ways in which they understand child abuse concerns. First, the important role of universities in readying students to work in the human services is acknowledged, along with a comment on the state of published literature in this area. Second, I set out the theoretical framework informing the approach, drawing on Worldview concept and Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory, which underpins a social justice approach to education. Third, the instructional methodology is detailed. Finally, the outcome of the session is presented in a series of thematic reflections. The paper concludes that the methodology adopted is effective and powerful in supporting students to increase their awareness of their own worldviews and how they relate to broader national child protection policies and practices. Adequate preparation of students, planning for student incivility, and, importantly, self-reflection on the part of the lecturer are key tools that should be considered if lecturers plan to adopt this method.

Bourke and Mounsell (2016) explicitly call for child protection educators to address “implicit barriers” about child abuse which may get in the way of identifying and reporting child abuse. They state, “Education must go beyond policies and procedures and be holistic in addressing an implicit belief system in relation to child protection” (2016, p. 314). Their point is salient for any educators preparing students to work in the human services. The role of universities in readying students, as part of their future roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding and child protection, is critical to consider in the context of current government policy in England. This paper describes an instructional method for undergraduate students designed to address implicit barriers, informed by Worldview concept (Kolto-Rivera, 2000), and guided by Mezirow’s Transformational Learning theory (1979) to support a social justice approach to teaching child protection.

English policy is clear that “safeguarding children and young people from harm is everybody’s responsibility” (Department for Education, 2015, p. 5). “Child protection” in its most general sense refers to activity undertaken by professionals to protect specific children who are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm. In England, child protection is conceptually embedded within a wider process referred to as “safeguarding,” which includes protecting all children from maltreatment, preventing impairment of all children’s health or development, ensuring that all children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care, and taking action to enable all children to have the best life chances (Brandon et al., 2014).

Statutory guidance in England—*Working Together to Safeguard Children*—places a duty on all professionals working with children and families to act on concerns

(HM Government, 2015). The Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2010) classified the variety of roles within the “children and young people’s workforce,” including “core” workforce roles (those who work with children and young people all the time), as well as the wider children and young people’s workforce (those who work with children and young people as part of their job role) (CWDC, 2010; p. 2). These roles span early years and childcare, sport and culture, justice and crime prevention, education, health, social, family and community support and youth services, and also front-line as well as management and leadership roles. Regardless of degree requirements, all of the children and young people’s workforce have similar responsibilities in relation to safeguarding that is set out within *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DfE, 2015).

A literature search was conducted to identify papers concerned with teaching, training, and pedagogy in the field of child protection and safeguarding within university contexts. Only one paper was found that related to the teaching of child protection to students on traditional degree pathways such as Applied Social Sciences, degrees which grant students qualifications to work in a range of roles in the human services but do not qualify them to work as registered social workers or teachers, for example. This paper found that child protection is inconsistently delivered and deficient in content covered, with particular weaknesses in building student confidence in responding to abuse in everyday professional practice (Rossato & Brakenridge, 2009).

Other papers were identified relating to teaching child protection in undergraduate and post-graduate degrees which confer a qualification on students to practice as social workers, teachers, nurses, or midwives, for example (see, for example, Baginsky & Hodgkinson, 1999; Baginsky & MacPherson, 2005; Bruce &

Whincup, 2012; Cooner & Hickman, 2008; Farrell & Walsh, 2010; Halsall & Marks-Maran, 2014; Keys, 2016; McKee & Dillenburger, 2012; Mirick, 2016; Pack, 2016; Tarr, Whittle, Wilson, & Hall, 2013). Among these disciplines, pre-service training in qualifying professional academic degrees in university settings is similarly found to be underdeveloped, patchy, inconsistent, and inadequate. Bourke and Mounsell (2016) argue that implicit barriers such as a person's belief system about child abuse produce barriers to reporting and responding to child protection concerns. Despite this, the review shows that most pedagogic papers on child protection focus on content of delivery, not reflective methods used, and none explicitly note the use of a transformational approach to teaching and learning to increase student awareness of their beliefs and values about child abuse and protection.

The findings from this review, then, suggest that pedagogical methods used to support teaching and learning for students enrolled specifically in non-qualifying academic programmes (such as Child and Adolescent Studies or Childhood and Youth Studies, Applied Social Studies, Health and Social Care or Criminology, for example) are generally overlooked. There is a more specific neglect of reflective methods related to child protection with university students, as is clear in the literature on qualifying programmes. It is, therefore, imperative to begin a dialogue about these methods in these contexts. Students within these types of programmes will go on to comprise a significant proportion of roles within both the core and wider children and young people's workforce, and they will hold important responsibility for safeguarding children. In this respect, this paper is unique and original and aims to begin this much needed dialogue.

### Theoretical framework

The underpinning theories that framed the development of the pedagogical approach outlined in this paper draw on the concept of "worldview" to provide the justification for focussing on students' implicit beliefs and value systems. "Transformational learning theory," which informed the development of my pedagogical approach, is then considered as a key method for teaching with the goals of social justice in mind.

### Worldview Theory

Students come to the university guided by implicit beliefs that powerfully influence the way they think and behave. Koltko-Rivera (2000, as cited in Koltko-Rivera, 2004) defines a worldview in the following way:

A worldview is a way of describing the universe and life within it, both in terms of what is and what

ought to be. A given worldview is a set of beliefs that includes limiting statements and assumptions regarding what exists and what does not (either in actuality, or in principle), what objects or experiences are good or bad, and what objectives, behaviors, and relationships are desirable or undesirable. A worldview defines what can be known or done in the world, and how it can be known or done. In addition to defining what goals can be sought in life, a worldview defines what goals should be pursued. Worldviews include assumptions that may be unproven, and even unprovable, but these assumptions are superordinate, in that they provide the epistemic and ontological foundations for other beliefs within a belief system (adapted from Koltko-Rivera, 2000, 2).

Worldviews are made up of three distinct types of "beliefs" (Rokeach, 1973): existential beliefs which are about the nature of what can be known or done in the world (for example, "There is only one God."); evaluative beliefs which are those that describe human beings or actions in evaluative terms (for example, "Child abusers are evil."); and pre- or proscriptive beliefs (values) which are those that describe the preferred means or ends (for example, "The state should stay out of family life."). Evidence from comparative cultural studies supports the notion that culture is antecedent to, and thus forms, cognition, affect and behaviour (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997). Ethno-cultural studies also demonstrate that values that are central to the self-influence cognition, affect, and behavior (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Inter-group comparative research (for example, with psychotherapists and counselors) has examined differences in attitudes, behavior and anticipated behavior (Kagee & Dixon, 2000) and find relationships between worldview and these outcomes. Studies of religion and religious experience also find relationships between religious orientation and a range of social and political attitudes (Wulff, 1997). Koltko-Rivera (2004) offers a synthesized model of "worldview," comprised of seven "groups" of beliefs (human nature, will, cognition, behaviour, interpersonal, truth, world and life) with each group made up of two or more dimensions, which in turn detail possible "positions" that a person may hold in relation to the dimension in question. It indicates the significant complexity of worldviews that are likely to be brought by students (and lecturers!) into any classroom.

Child protection, as a subject, presents a high degree of potential for these complex worldviews to collide. Parenting provides an excellent example in which students are rarely dispassionate within classroom discussions. All students have experiences of being parented, and some with parenting their own

children. Recent neurobiological research has found that an important predictor of parenting behavior is how parents were parented themselves (Lomanowska, Boivin, Hertzman, & Fleming, 2017), which supports the idea of worldview theory. There is, however, no consensus on what constitutes “good enough” parenting (Brandon et al., 2014). The variety of parenting styles that exist alongside this general lack of agreement about parenting at least partly explains why neglect is so difficult to address (Allnock, 2016).

More generally, while there is increasing social consensus in the United Kingdom of the point that child abuse is fairly common (Bentley, O’Hagan, Raff, & Bhatti, 2016) and on what constitutes the major forms of child abuse (Fond et al., 2015), there is much less consensus on how these are actually defined, what causes them, and how they should be responded to (see, for example, Bentley et al., 2016; The Children’s Society, 2010; Fond et al., 2015). Studies on public attitudes towards child abuse and protection demonstrate variation both cross-nationally (Sajkowska, 2007) and within individual nations (The Children’s Society, 2010; Fond et al., 2015), as well as by age and gender (The Children’s Society, 2010). Lindland and Kendall-Taylor’s (2013) compelling attitudinal work on child maltreatment found significant gaps between child protection “expert” views and those held by the general public in relation to child maltreatment.

The general public, for example, most commonly recognize sexual and physical abuse but fail to acknowledge the more widespread maltreatment such as neglect and emotional abuse that is common in society. The public tends to personalize blame, attributing abuse to personal deficiencies, whereas expert views consistently highlight structural explanations. In relation to the ways that abuse impacts children, the public similarly looks to individual factors, believing that abuse can be overcome through emotional effort, willpower and self-management, whereas experts cite neurobiological research that documents the ways that maltreatment changes the architecture of the brain. The public tends to associate types of abuse with social class, although research tells us that all types of abuse occur across all socio-economic strata. These are clear examples of “implicit theories” (Bourke & Mounsell, 2016) or worldviews that must be addressed in educational contexts in order to prepare students to effectively work with children and families.

The significance, then, of worldviews in the context of teaching child protection cannot be understated. Worldviews must be engaged with in order to develop those key skills required by those intending to work in the children and young people’s workforce, including the ability to listen and build empathy, respect, observation and judgement; the understanding of context, self-awareness and self-understanding; the ability to analyze

objectively; the confidence to challenge one’s own (and others’) practice; and the development of appropriate relationships with children and their families (CWDC, 2010). It is imperative to address these values in order to ensure that students are equipped to act legally, ethically, and morally within the context of child protection and safeguarding practice within the United Kingdom.

### **Social Justice and the Possibility of a Transformational Learning Approach**

Teaching child protection ultimately requires a “social justice” approach to education. It is a complex social problem framed by social, relational, and individual contexts that inter-act and reinforce one another. The purpose of a social justice approach to education is to support the full and equal participation of all groups in society (Bell, 1997). This requires preparing and supporting students to critically examine oppression at institutional, cultural, and individual levels in order to search for opportunities for social change (Hackman, 2005). Students must first be able to critically reflect on their own beliefs and values in order to transcend individual experience. This critical reflection can be facilitated through classroom activities.

The teaching of child protection, then, within a traditional informational approach sits uncomfortably. An “informational” approach to learning is the process by which new information is added to that which is already known/ possessed by the learner (Baumgartner, 2001), an approach referred to by Friere (1982) as the “banking model” where “knowledge deposits” are made to learners by teachers. This type of approach changes “what” we know, is additive in nature, and brings external knowledge into an existing worldview (Baumgartner, 2001), but it does not always require critical engagement. There is, arguably, some learning in child protection and safeguarding which fits within this model, such as disseminating knowledge to students about the legal and policy frameworks which guide practitioner responsibilities. However, a considerable amount of professional activity in the child protection field is based on knowledge which is fluid, constructed, relational, and at times ambiguous, requiring interpretation and, thus, what has frequently been referred to as professional judgment rather than a “tick box” cultural response (Munro, 2008).

A transformational approach, on the other hand, “is the process of effecting change in a *frame of reference* (Mezirow’s emphasis)” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This frame of reference may suitably be aligned to the notion of “worldview,” where the transformational approach addresses the way a learner views the world in which they live. Mezirow (1997) argued that we tend to strongly resist and/or reject ideas that contradict our preconceptions. In order to jar learners into a new way

of thinking, “something” must occur that grabs the learner’s attention. Mezirow’s cognitive/rational approach to this form of transformational learning emphasizes reflection upon previously held assumptions on the world and how it operates. Moreover, Mezirow argues that a reflective discourse with others is required to assist in the transformative process, reflecting “communicative learning” in contrast to “instrumental learning” (Baumgartner et al., 2003, p. 24). Reflections on assumptions which are embedded in social discourse thereby support the creation of new understandings.

Mezirow (2000) proposed a ten-step process related to transformation: “1) disorientation; 2) emotional reaction; 3) assessment of presently held assumptions; 4) understanding that one is not alone; 5) exploration of new roles; 6) creating a plan of action; 7) gaining knowledge for the plan; 8) trying on the selected new role; 9) development of confidence in the new role; and 10) integration of the new perspective into one’s life.” (p. 22). The key to all of these steps is critical reflection and reflective discourse, both of which explicitly underpin the approach tested out in the activity described in the following sections.

### **Unit Description and Composition of Student Cohort**

The unit under discussion in this article is formally titled Child Protection: Critically Analyzing Policy and Practice. It remains actively delivered as a core, required unit for third (final) year students enrolled on a Child and Adolescent Studies program (delivered within an Applied Social Studies Department) at a university in England. Students enrolled on other programmes in this Department can elect to take the unit. This paper describes a single session that was delivered within the last three years (precise year of delivery is withheld to strengthen anonymity of the session described). This session was explicitly designed to link to a summative assessment where students were required to reflect on their values and experiences in relation to a child protection case study.

There were 101 students enrolled on the unit. Enrollment data shows a highly diverse student group in terms of age, which ranged from 18 to 54, with an average age of 27.5. They were also ethnically diverse. Fourteen students identified as Asian: 10 as Pakistani, 2 as Bangladeshi, 1 as Indian, and 1 as “Other” in the Asian category. Four students identified as Black African, 12 as Black Caribbean, and 1 as “Other” Black. Twenty-five students identified as White, and 3 identified as having mixed heritage White/Black Caribbean). Three students were enrolled as overseas/international students from countries both within and outside of Europe, with the remainder

enrolled as home students. A majority were female (n=96), and 10 reported a disability. Fifty students were enrolled in the Child and Adolescent Studies program, 20 in the Applied Social Studies program, 11 in the Criminology program, and 21 in Health and Social Care.

### **Session Aims and Outcomes**

The session under discussion in this article was designed to support students in preparing to achieve one of the core outcomes of the unit: to analyze the dilemmas and uncertainties inherent in this field and arrive at viable and appropriate strategies for addressing these. The assessment criteria aligned to this outcome stipulates that students must apply an understanding of the impact of personal attitudes and values on judgements in this field.

Prior deliveries of this unit incorporated two sessions devoted to supporting student reflection and using a number of practice-based scenarios in class to promote discussion and debate. In developing the session further, the aim was to facilitate the first and second steps in Mezirow’s process of transformation: 1) disorientation, and 2) elicitation of an emotional reaction.

At the time this approach was developed, I had found no papers to help inform the development of the method. As I was writing this paper, however, I identified a theoretical paper exploring the potential of transformational theory in practice which described the use of a similar approach (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015). The paper included a discussion about an instructional approach designed by the first author that used a similar survey method to assess students’ perspectives on a range of controversial issues such as euthanasia, immigration and abortion, but which similarly (to my method) sought to trigger ‘disorienting’ dilemmas in accordance with Mezirow’s transformational learning framework. While Christie’s general approach and aims were similar, the method used to capture survey data was slightly different. Where relevant, Christie’s approach will be considered in relation to the method developed here. The aims of the session are presented below, along with a description of the teaching method designed to achieve each aim.

### **Aim 1: Establish and capture individual student perceptions in relation to a number of child protection scenarios.**

Drawing on previous colleague’s use of real-world scenarios to stimulate student reflection, I developed a survey using Qualtrics web-based survey software and incorporating 10 different scenarios, and I distributed this to students a week in advance of the session. Previously the scenarios were introduced in class; however, I felt that

participation might be increased through the use of an anonymous survey and that the impact of seeing the results would be greater. The survey was distributed via the university Blackboard system as an “announcement,” which was then automatically forwarded to student email accounts. I invited students to participate in an anonymous voluntary survey about their understanding of possible child protection scenarios. I indicated that the survey would not take too long to fill out, as well as that the information would be used for pedagogic purposes and would guide the session the following week. A detailed information sheet was included at the start of the survey which described the nature of the scenarios as sensitive and which noted that some students may find them upsetting. Students were informed that they could skip any scenario/question pair they wished, or they could choose to exit the survey at any time without penalty. I requested their consent to participate, which they had to provide in order to progress on to the first scenario.

In the survey, I asked students to read and reflect on each scenario and choose one response that they felt best described them. An example of one of the scenarios is provided below:

By mutual agreement, a thirteen-year-old girl is having regular sexual intercourse with a thirteen-year-old boy. He gives her money and protects her from other boys. She says that she enjoys this relationship.

Students were provided with the following choices for this scenario:

1. The scenario is acceptable behavior.
2. The scenario demonstrates poor behavior/decision-making by the female child.
3. Would have to take advice.
4. The scenario is criminal and/or the child is at risk of significant harm.

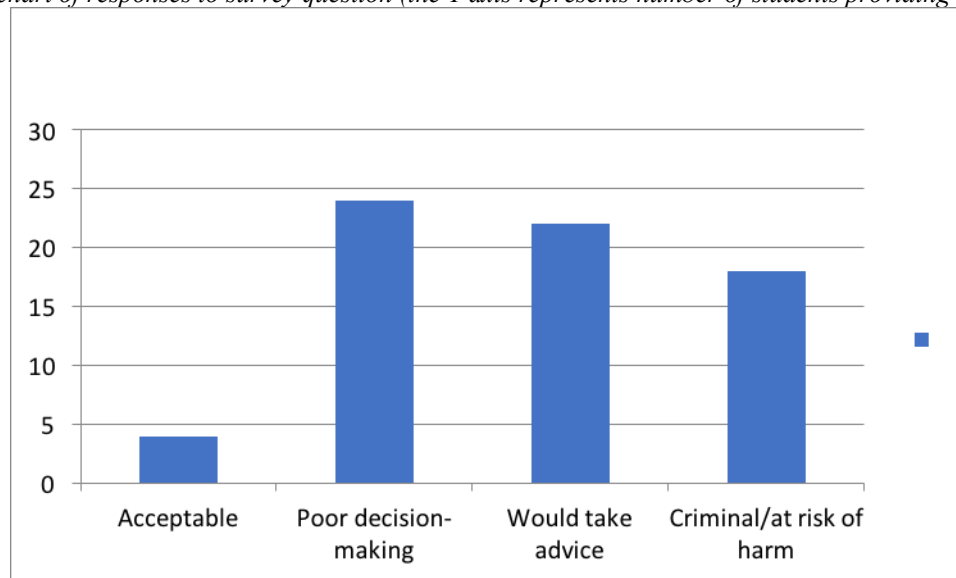
Christie et al.’s (2015) approach was structured slightly differently. First, Christie used a paper-based survey in class, turning the results into power-point slides then and there while the students were asked to predict the results on another sheet of paper. The survey posed statements on a range of controversial issues (for example, “Euthanasia should be legalized”), and responses were captured through the use of a Likert scale (for example, “Agree or Disagree”). The survey used in my teaching session could be adapted to incorporate a Likert scale in a similar way for single statements devised for each scenario.

**Aim 2: Place those perceptions in context with the perception of others (to trigger “disorientation” and elicit emotional responses).**

Before the session, I analyzed the responses using basic descriptive statistics and produced charts illustrating the students’ responses in aggregate (Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Bar chart of responses to survey question (the Y axis represents number of students providing a response)*



On the day of the session, students were reminded what the scenario was and the possible responses to the question. In keeping with the tenets of transformational learning theory, I encouraged collaborative discussion among students before showing them the results, giving them time to consider what they thought the findings would be. Because of the physical setup in the classroom, my method diverged from Christie et al.'s (2015) method, which broke students into groups, provided them with hard copies of the survey and asked students to "predict" the results and document their answers, individually and then collectively. My classroom was "lecture hall style" and very large, preventing the facilitation of groups numbering more than a few students. In future, it would be beneficial to follow Christie's approach to facilitate broader collaborative discussions and capture data on student predictions for later analysis.

Following illustration of the actual student cohort responses, I encouraged students to collaboratively reflect on their own response to the scenario and discuss what those findings imply, including consideration of the different beliefs and values they hold about what constitutes a child protection issue. Like Christie et al. (2015), I facilitated a debate about the "sources" of values aligned to different responses (for example, students' own childhood experiences, cultural differences in how childhood is constructed, students' own experiences of parenting, etc.). I then took an additional "step" following presentation of the student survey responses, diverging from Christie et al.'s (2015) method: I presented slides that detailed relevant legislation, guidance and policy, theory and research related to each scenario. I encouraged reflection on how some of the student responses that would not be appropriate, given current practice and legislation, would impact on the children and families affected by the scenario. This allowed students to discuss collaboratively why certain responses are inappropriate and internalize contemporary practice responses. My goal was that students would begin to understand how they, as individuals, fit within a larger system of professional response.

### **Thematic Reflection on Outcomes of the Session**

A number of important themes emerged which are discussed here including the observation of a variety of worldviews, the disorientation and emotional reactions observed; the importance of collaborative discussions; and my own role within this process.

### **The Survey: A Multiplicity of World Views**

A high survey completion rate was obtained: 68 students completed the survey representing 67% of the student cohort. This was surprising given that the survey

was voluntary, carried no contribution to their overall marks, and was not designed as a "formative assessment." Taylor's (2003) review of the literature on transformation learning suggests that "value-laden" or controversial course content "provoked reflection...more so than other content" (p. 156), so it is possible that the topics contained within the survey ignited student interest more so than a survey on something less controversial. Since it was the start of the term, student motivation may have been higher than it might have been later in the year. The responses to all 10 scenarios demonstrated significantly heterogeneous results. Across all examples, there was a significant proportion who said they "would take advice" in relation to the scenario, indicating also a high degree of uncertainty. Including this as a response choice clearly had some limitations as it allowed students to "opt out" of stating their choices. This could be removed to effectively "force" students to choose an option, unless a Likert scale approach is adopted as previously suggested.

### **Disorientation and Emotional Response**

My aim to "disorient" students and "elicit emotional responses" from them was evidenced in a range of observed reactions to the survey results. First, I observed an unusual increase in student contributions during the session in comparison to the first two lecture sessions of the same teaching year. Second, there was a notable energy and buzz in the room with students sometimes talking over one another to make their points. Disorientation manifested in facial expressions showing surprise and shock, head-shaking, gasps, and laughter when the full findings were revealed. Some students verbally expressed their surprise, while one student stated that they could not believe that people "believed what they believed." These sorts of responses were utilised as anchors for discussion to begin challenging students on what appeared to be entrenched views about child protection.

The disorientation and emotional reactions observed were the kind that I had anticipated and were, on the whole, manageable within the context of a large class size. However, one particular scenario ignited significant dissent among some students in reaction to another student's contribution. This reaction was a powerful demonstration of "disorientation" in the context of challenging worldviews, and it also illustrates the dangers involved (Finlay, 2008).

A debate occurred about whether parental principles and practices of "social nudity" or "naturism" present a risk to children. The initial discussion was lively and reflected a depth of thinking among the students who were grappling with their ideas. In response to a number of students who voiced their opinions that "naturism" is always harmful to children,

a White South African student made the argument that social nudity is not always harmful to children and is often based in historical and cultural traditions. The student then shared an example of South African tribal cultures wearing revealing attire. This example elicited highly volatile reactions from many of the Black African students in the class, and what began as an intellectual discussion quickly deteriorated into arguments and intimidation.

There are two complex issues to address in relation to what occurred: 1) the root of student anger, and 2) the incivility in the classroom. It was clear through the incident and discussions with students in the following weeks that at least some of the Black African students felt re-victimized through a student's use of what they saw (rightly or wrongly) as an apartheid discourse. A social justice approach to education should orient us to understand and challenge ideas based in historical, social and political oppression (Hackman, 2005). Missionary and colonial mechanisms of oppression in South Africa included discourses that sought to "civilize" the "primitive natives," which included the introduction of Western styles of dress (Ramaite & Mdhluli, 2008, cited in Grant & Nodoba, 2009). While the point being made by the White South African student was a relevant and useful one in the context of our discussion on child protection, the student inadvertently tapped into deeply held political and historical anxieties, and this required acknowledgement by the lecturer.

At the same time, the wider reactions to the student's comment—however much other students disliked or felt victimised by what was said—demonstrated "incivility" in the classroom that similarly needed to be addressed. Clark (2008, p. 38) defines incivility as "disregard and insolence for others, causing an atmosphere of disrespect, conflict, and stress". The verbal accusations levelled at the student, delivered by multiple students and in combination with shouting and threatening postures, can be described as "intimidation," according to Feldman (2001), given the potentially serious impact to the student, as well as other students in the room (Lampman et al., 2009). While the student "intimidators" were angry with the other student's example, which for them reflected broader, socio-political histories of oppression, the incivility removed all possibility of a productive discussion based in a social justice approach.

Following the session, I revisited this dual problem in the following week's lecture by posing another controversial scenario, putting them in the role of a family support worker having to engage with a family with extreme views. Students were required to work together to solve the dilemma and devise a plan for how they would engage with the family using professional values and judgments. The aim was to situate students in a professional role so that they could reflect on how they would have to react professionally in a situation that made

them uncomfortable. Many students "got" the point that emotive and threatening reactions within such a professional context would be unacceptable in the workplace. Interestingly, some of the students contacted me to apologize for the outbursts. The student that initially made the contribution also came to discuss with me why her example caused so much distress. This conversation allowed her to reflect on her own social location in relation to the other students and to gain a broader perspective on debating these types of controversial issues. The university context is an important place to support students to explore worldviews in this way and should be a safe space to do so.

This example is not shared with the intention of dissuading other lecturers from using this type of approach. It is shared to disseminate lessons to lecturers on how to prepare, respond, and reflect on their own roles in the process, even when sessions do not go the way they are planned. In any context where issues of social justice are being addressed, there are likely to be collisions of worldviews, but this is not a reason to avoid addressing them (Hackman, 2005). The process of transformation requires students to grapple with difficult issues to allow learning to emerge, and despite the challenges encountered in this example, the students were clearly engaged at both personal and intellectual levels. Also, the session remained an active topic of conversation among students for the weeks that followed, illustrating how impactful it was. Following my experience, a quote by Brookfield (1990, p. 178) feels particularly apt:

Questioning the assumptions on which we act and exploring alternative ideas are not only difficult but also psychologically explosive...[it] is like laying down charges of psychological dynamite. When these assumptions explode...the whole structure of our assumptive world crumbles. Hence, educators who foster transformative learning are rather like psychological and cultural demolition experts.

### **The Importance of Collaborative Discussion in Challenging Worldviews**

While the emotional reactions and disorientation so clearly observed demonstrated that students were engaged and beginning to grapple with new ideas, it is fruitful to consider in what sorts of ways students' worldviews might have been challenged. The emotional reactions and disorientation which occurred are associated more clearly with individual student responses and internal reaction to new ideas in the immediate sense following presentation of the survey results and later, the legislative, policy, and practice context. Transformational learning, however, also requires collaboration and feedback. Providing the

space for students to collaboratively discuss and negotiate the scenarios proved powerful. At least some students shared with others what their responses to the survey had been, prompting others to do the same. It seemed, then, that at least some students entered a “problem-solving” mode in order to come to some agreement about the scenario. I could see other students less vocally engaged but clearly listening to their fellow students and processing the discussions. I noted that some students conceded that their worldview in relation to a given scenario may be overly harsh or lenient, while some students remained stubbornly wedded to their initial responses. These are merely observations, however. Changing assumptions, or at least having assumptions challenged, is a complex process and difficult to measure.

In relation to the final stage in the session (sharing the legislative, policy, and practice contexts), students were again given the space to reflect collaboratively but in a way which forced them to consider how the scenario would directly impact them as professionals. A particular example is worth mentioning to demonstrate this. One scenario was concerned with “smacking,” which, in the UK at the time of this article’s publication, is illegal except where smacking amounts to “reasonable punishment” (see Section 58 of the Children Act, 2004). “Reasonable punishment” invites interpretation, but the law is clear that severe punishment involving infliction of wounds, actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm, or child cruelty is illegal. Despite the law, smacking amounting to ‘reasonable punishment’ is highly contested in the UK. This scenario offered students ample opportunity to debate the issue while highlighting a plethora of views given that discipline (using smacking or not) is intimately tied to parenting practices. Students used everyday examples to debate the notion of “reasonable punishment,” with discussions drawing on arguments about child versus parental and/or adult rights. Encouragingly, students were even drawing on theories and frameworks they had learned in their other units to contest or support the debates emerging within the discussions. Students noted their discomfort in relation to this and other scenarios, which clearly have raised their awareness of the challenges they may face in professional practice contexts.

### **The Lecturer’s Role**

My interest in promoting transformative change among students of child protection cannot sit outside my own personal reflection on the both the task and my own experience in delivering the session. It is not only the students, but also the lecturer, who comes to the session with their own worldviews and a social justice perspective requires the lecturer to also reflect on

themselves and the personal qualities that inform their practice (Hackman, 2005). My own reflection on the session involved considerations of white privilege (I am White) and self-interrogation about the scenarios and the national context which defines them – or not – as child protection issues. Both of these reflections helped me to acknowledge the historical, social and political contexts that underpinned the student reactions and to consider ways to intellectually challenge students in the future who share views that may be experienced by others as insensitive or ignorant. This has to be balanced, however, against the need for a place of safety to facilitate dialogue, which is a key principle in both transformative learning and social justice education. In the future, I would consider using an inter-group dialogue technique to cultivate discussion and exchange of ideas and experiences across group differences, a model proposed by Zúñiga et al. (1997).

### **Conclusion**

This instructional paper discussed my experience of designing and implementing a transformational learning activity that aimed to raise student awareness of their world views in relation to child abuse and protection. The aim was to trigger “disorientation” and “elicit emotional reactions” (the first two steps in Mezirow’s framework for change) for the purposes of engaging students to reflect on their assumptions and worldviews. I am confident, as was Christie et al. (2015), that this method is effective in meeting this aim. Worldviews were clearly ‘challenged’ through student recognition of different perspectives and were more powerfully challenged in the context of collaborative discussions with other students. “Challenged” worldviews manifested in lively debates, disagreements, students asking more questions, and problem-solving discussions. “Changed worldviews” are much harder to assess and, indeed, are not even expected to occur this early within Mezirow’s framework, but these steps represent important stages in a journey towards transformation. The activity supported students to acknowledge that differences in values exist. Moreover, the activity placing student perceptions in context with child protection policy and practice in England supported students’ understanding of how their own values may be at odds with contemporary theory and research in this area. The activity illustrates how students can become aware of the assumptions they hold and question their validity, particularly in relation to the social and political context in which they live.

The activity also highlights the dangers of reflection as highlighted by Finlay (2008). While the incivility that erupted was, at the time, uncomfortable, frustrating, and difficult to contain, it became a positive



platform for further exploring professional responses in the context of the human services. Students, when they go on to become practitioners in their fields, will inevitably be working with families whose worldviews may significantly differ from their own. The skills and capabilities required for working in the children and young people's workforce demand professionalism and non-judgmental approaches, and the emotional responses provide opportunity to support students to make links between their behaviors and responses in the workplace. I did encounter a challenge in addressing the very real anxieties held by the student, however. Hackman's (2005) advice for effectively teaching social justice is for lecturers to be aware of the multi-cultural dynamics of the classroom where social identities impact on dialogue. Frameworks such as Zuniga et al.'s (1997) can assist in facilitating discussion across differences, not only in relation to ethnicity, but also in generating positive discussion across other forms of social identity. Finally, continued and on-going reflection by the lecturer is important in effectively acknowledging inter-group difference and can aid in providing a balanced, rather than reactive, response to difficult conversations. Although whistles, bells, and riot gear might have helped to immediately contain the disagreements described here, they are inadequate accessories for addressing the real anxieties that emerge in conversations about social justice.

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#### Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the University of Bedfordshire for supporting the writing of this article at the annual writing retreat. Special thanks to David Matthew of the Learning Centre for Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire for support and guidance.

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