Short Article

Observing high quality children's residential care: Reflecting on an implementation approach

Mihaela Manole, Laura Quinn & Gemma Watson

Abstract:

Delivering high-quality residential care to children requires skilled, knowledgeable, and reflective practitioners who are supported to continuously learn and develop. In collaboration with Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses, we explored how a practice profile of learnable, teachable, doable, and assessable residential child care practice could be used to support practice across two of the houses. We explored how a structured approach to observation and feedback could help to grow and develop residential childcare practice. In order to assess the impact of this work across house staff teams, senior managers and project team members, we undertook a series of 'sailboat retrospective' sessions. This highlighted how a whole system approach, leadership support, and a sense of shared ownership helped to cement this work, improving practice for young people and professional development for staff.

Introduction

Considering how high-quality residential child care can be delivered to children and young people every day by skilled, knowledgeable, and aspirational adults was a journey we embarked on together with Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses.

Informed by implementation science, particularly the active implementation frameworks outlined by Fixen et al. (2019), we understood that to sustain high-quality practice over time, the practice has to be clearly defined so that it becomes 'teachable, learnable, doable, and assessable' (p.70). We thus aimed to shine a light on those components of practice that have a major impact on children's and young people's experiences and outcomes. We worked alongside a change team that included those Sycamore staff with extensive experience of direct residential child care practice, mid manager, and senior manager roles. Together, we considered the skills and knowledge of people across Sycamore to develop a practice profile, which is a tool that describes the core components of

high-quality residential child care with practice examples aligned to each component. The tool offers a way for those caring for children to identify the strengths in their practice that should be sustained, as well as those where improvements in practice are needed.

Having defined practice in a way that can be aligned to the day-to-day, the organisation was getting ready to move into a period of observing practice. But first, we supported the change team to carefully determine where they wanted to start their observations, knowing that readiness for change must be appraised (Aarons et al., 2011) to understand the extent to which there is capacity for and openness to innovation and learning. The change team carried out a readiness assessment of their houses, and two were chosen based on factors including how settled the staff and young people had been, the capacity and time protected for progressing this work, and the support from the management team to remove emerging barriers. Houses were selected where practice was appraised to be at a progressing level, with pockets of good practice, but also situations where practice was used inconsistently or in a limited range of contexts. The readiness assessment also looked for a strong learning culture, with openness to sharing and discussing learning.

There were two sets of observers, the internal team made up of staff within the houses themselves, and the external team made up of Sycamore staff who were part of the change team around this work. Observers spent time in the houses observing practice and offering positive and later developmental feedback as well as coaching to practice. A total of 77 observations took place during a pilot period of eight months, with feedback captured on observation forms.

Following the period of observation and feedback, it was crucial that we began to understand the impact of this on the staff and their practice. We were keen to understand in more detail not what had been observed, but what resulted from staff being offered feedback, and how this informed supervision and ongoing professional development.

Methodology

We used the 'sailboat retrospective' to support reflection and capture feedback on the observations. The 'sailboat retrospective' was borne out of the agile team approach, first used in the software development industry (McKinsey & Company, 2023). The idea was that a small team, made up of individuals with differing specialities, could work much more quickly and efficiently to find the solutions to big problems. Given the scope of professional knowledge, and with different team members often tackling diverse aspects of the programming, it is no surprise that teams needed a way to stop and take stock of their projects. In our work with Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses we also diversified our approach with specific members of the project team, made up of our own staff and the provider's staff, taking the lead in different aspects of the work. As we

reached the end of pilot phase we really wanted to stop, reflect, and learn as much as we could from the work so far.

The structure of the 'sailboat retrospective' allowed us to consider what made people feel good about the work (the sun on our faces), what helped push the work forwards (the wind at our back), what held us back (the anchor slowing us), and the risks ahead (the reef to be avoided).

We were keen to understand the views and perspectives of both the teams whose practice was observed and the change team involved in designing, supporting, and carrying out the observations. As such we carried out two sailboat retrospective sessions with the staff team at each of the two houses, and two with the project team and the internal Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) staff team. Some of the smaller sessions were conducted online, using a digital platform that creates a collaborative workspace, and the larger sessions took place in person, within the houses. The sessions were facilitated by CELCIS staff to offer a degree of independence.

A thematic analysis was then undertaken, focused on the quality and depth of the information captured. The data were coded in an inductive manner, allowing the data to define the themes, rather than any predetermined theoretical approach. We also considered some of the data captured through observing the delivery of the sessions, and the experiences and reflections of the facilitators.

Results

Our findings show that the collective approach to the work undertaken by Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses had resulted in collective ownership of the common goal, across staff and manager teams, of improving experiences for children and young people. This was a significant driver for change and improvement within the service.

There was consistency across all groups involved in the 'sailboat retrospectives', that the experience of being offered both positive and developmental feedback had been well received. All groups agreed that the practice profile and observational feedback supported the development and consistency of practice, aided communication across teams, and enhanced supervision between managers and staff.

We also found that the familiarity of those in an observation role helped with preparing teams to feel comfortable and open to be observed, which was also a positive factor during observation periods. The staff spoke about feeling nervous, apprehensive, or worried prior to being observed and receiving feedback. However, the way in which the internal observation teams carried out

their role relationally, with respect and understanding of the team and children in the houses, alleviated these concerns.

Managers spoke positively about the impact having access to feedback collated during observations has had on supervision. According to managers, the content captured in the observation forms has made supervision more purposeful, supporting staff members to have manageable goals, aligned to the practice profile, and has personalised the time spent during supervision. It has allowed adults to focus on their own short-term and long-term development, all while supporting the annual review process across the houses.

The experience of observation was described as being positive and supportive, despite anticipation of the experience having created uncertainty, worry, and anxiety. This highlights the importance of preparation work and scaffolding for preparing staff, which led us to conclude that communication and storytelling about the work should concentrate in these areas.

When thinking about discussing the 'anchors' in the work, capacity was identified as one of the most significant barriers across all groups. There was dedication to the process of observation and feedback, but, at times, it was difficult to support this happening alongside competing demands in the houses. Recording observations often generated more paperwork for those in the internal observation team, but also for others to read, think about, and support developmental conversations.

When asked to reflect on what held the work back, staff focused on the emotional impact of being observed and offered feedback, while managers and the project team focused more on organisational and system barriers. This dichotomy, while not entirely unexpected, was helpful to enable us to effectively shape our communication and storytelling about the impact of the work for these two groups. Nevertheless, staff also shared that having access to laptops and software in the houses was an ongoing discussion during the pilot phase. This had an impact on the timely response to writing and reading feedback and observation forms.

Approach limitations and reflections

Some of the project team members were experienced and skilled in reflective practice, however we wanted to encourage participation from as wide a group as possible, so we knew we needed to ensure the retrospective learning sessions were inclusive and welcoming. The sailboat retrospective felt like a good fit, as it was a simple framework, presented in a light and visually engaging manner. We were able to evidence a depth and richness of response that enabled us to effectively stop and take stock of progress so far.

The initial sailboat session was carried out with the children's residential service management team, in-person using a single facilitator, who was also the note taker. The session went well, and the team took to the approach quickly, offering a great deal of depth within their reflections. After a debrief, the CELCIS team felt that they would have benefited from both a facilitator and a note taker, to free up capacity in the facilitator, strengthen the exploration, and ensure high quality notes could be captured to aid the analysis.

This dual facilitation approach also allowed more capacity for observation within the exercise itself. An example of this was that a real difference was noted between the two children's house sessions, with one house having more of the senior management team present, which led to a discussion more focused on what was hoped for in terms of service and practice development, and the other, with fewer senior managers involved, resulting in a much more staff-led session rich in reflections on their experiences of being observed and receiving feedback. Within facilitation debrief this was noted, which allowed us to explore the issue more fully. We reflected that having carried out a similar exercise with the senior staff may have left them feeling more prepared for and engaged in the session, leading them to role model for the wider staff group and inadvertently dominating the session. It was agreed that in future we would aim to avoid members experiencing session duplication to avoid this imbalance.

Summary of factors that enabled observation of practice

There were consistent enabling factors of practice observation identified across the 'sailboat retrospective' responses. The whole system approach to change, aligned to Senge's (2006) systems thinking, which considers an organisation as a whole and pays attention to the interconnections between its different parts, as was evident in how the Sycamore change work had been prepared, delivered and evaluated. The key enabling factors included:

- **Leadership support and permissions**

Staff felt the presence of leadership support and the permissions granted for decisions to be made would further advance and benefit the work.

- **A dedicated senior manager aligned to the work**

Permissions and leadership support were critical to the pilot's success. However, having one dedicated senior manager aligned with the work created an internal feedback loop between practice and senior management. The staff involved had the autonomy to make decisions, but, at times, required support from different parts of the internal system of the organisation. Having a dedicated senior manager allowed this to happen in a timely and responsive manner.

- **A learning culture that places importance on honesty and relationships**

How the teams approached the work aligned with Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses' vision of creating warm, loving homes where everyone laughs, learns, grows into their future, and is treasured always. The work confirmed the importance of creating spaces for not only the children but the adults caring for them to develop open and honest relationships focused on growth.

- **Observers who knew the work, the adults, and the children**

It was important that observations did not interrupt the rhythm of day-to-day life in the houses. Therefore, the selection of the observers was carefully considered, which the findings of the 'sailboat retrospective' confirming the criteria and approach required. The observers were staff who were familiar to the children and the adults caring for them in each house. They explained their role to the children and offered time for questions to ensure they understood. The project team reflected that the children appeared very comfortable with having the observers in the houses. The observers also spent time preparing staff and visiting houses more regularly in preparation for observation.

Conclusion:

The pilot phase of practice observations carried out by Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses, with CELCIS support, has fostered a strong sense of shared ownership and commitment among staff, including managers, to impact the experiences of children and young people. Despite initial apprehensions, the respectful and relational approach of the observers alleviated concerns, making the process positive and supportive. The involvement of familiar observers and dedicated leadership has been crucial in creating a conducive environment for practice development. While capacity and organisational barriers posed challenges, the overall impact of the observation and feedback process has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the importance of scaffolding through preparation, communication, and a supportive learning culture. The 'sailboat retrospective' proved to be a valuable and accessible approach that supported engagement across staff groups, and enabled reflection and learning.

References

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About the authors

CELCIS brings together diverse expertise to improve the lives of children and young people.

Mihaela Manole is a researcher with expertise in implementation, focusing on understanding how policies and practices can be effectively embedded, ensuring sustainable, evidence-informed improvements.

Gemma Watson is an improving care experiences consultant, who provides specialist knowledge and support to practioners to enhance the quality of care for children living in residential settings.

Laura Quinn is an early help consultant, supporting services to act early in the system to support children.

Together, they drive positive change in children's services through research, practice, and strategic support.

You can find more information on the CELCIS work with Aberlour Sycamore Children's Houses here.