

Institution: University of Sussex		
Unit of Assessment: 20 – Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Improving Child Care Social Work Practice through Talking and Listening to Children		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Gillian Ruch	Professor	2014 – current
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>For social workers, effective communication with children in challenging circumstances is key to gaining their trust. Sussex researchers' child-centric training workshops and digital learning resources have enhanced social work practice, enabling more meaningful conversations between social work professionals, children and caregivers. The project's partnership with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the International Futures Forum (IFF) has reached over 150 Children's Services Departments across England and led to social work organisations and practitioners adopting these methods, which supplement existing direct work practices with specialist adapted materials (a 'Kitbag' that includes prompt cards and puppets). The project has been developed into an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) academic module for newly qualified social workers, and also become a frequently-used learning resource in a social work qualifying programme at the University of South Australia.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Since the 1970s, serious shortcomings in social workers' communication skills with children have been a recurrent feature of reports published following the death or serious maltreatment of a child known to Children's Services. Despite the chronic nature of this problem, research evidence about how social workers communicate with children in their everyday encounters remains scarce.</p> <p>The Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) Project (2013-15)</p> <p>The TLC research is an ESRC-funded four UK nations project which began in 2013 and was conducted by a team of academics from the Universities of Sussex, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Queens', Belfast (http://www.talkingandlisteningtochildren.co.uk). The research explored how social workers communicate with children in their everyday practice. Over a two-year period ethnographic, interview and documentary data from diverse UK-wide childcare social work settings were gathered and analysed. The scarcity of empirical research derived <i>directly</i> from ethnographic observation in this professional domain underlines the distinctive and extensive nature of the TLC dataset which comprises: (i) 82 observations of direct encounters between social workers and children/families; (ii) over 100 pre- and post-encounter interviews with social workers; (iii) extensive ethnographic observation conducted over 4-5 months in eight diverse childcare social work teams (two in each of the four UK nations); (iv) 10 video-stimulated recall recordings of social worker-child interactions. The amalgamated UK-wide findings underpin the research impact reported here.</p> <p>Key Research Findings</p> <p>Firstly, the research found that social workers' communication with children is highly context specific, shaped by the individual <i>child</i>, their <i>case</i> (i.e. their circumstances e.g. child in need, child at risk, looked after child) and the wider organisational, societal and political <i>context</i>. It underlined that social workers need to treat each child as unique and recognise that children and young people have a range of understandings about and responses to social workers. Some, often taking the lead from a parent, experience their social worker negatively as a stranger, a</p>		

threat, an intruder, 'the enemy'. Others accept their social workers more positively as a visitor, a friend and/or a source of support (R2, R3, R4). This key finding has informed the creation of the TLC 3Cs – *child-case-context* – ecological model of communication, a conceptual framework to help social workers to respond to each child in their own right (R1).

Secondly, the research highlighted the efforts social workers make to engage positively with children and their parents, but how they often lack professional confidence and child-centric resources to assist them in communicating with children. Indeed, the research revealed that less than 20% of the social workers who were observed used any type of resource to facilitate their communication with children (R1, R5, R6). This finding led to the discovery of a remarkable shortfall in the provision of resources by employers to facilitate social workers' effective communication with children and young people. Very few local authorities have suitable child-friendly meeting spaces and when social workers were observed to use play resources, they had, almost always, purchased them themselves (R1, R5, R6).

3. References to the research

All published outputs cited are in leading peer-reviewed journals within the field.

- R1: Winter, K., Cree, V., Hallett, S., Hadfield, M., Ruch, G., Morrison, F., and Holland, S. (2017) Exploring Communication between Social Workers, Children and Young People, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47(5): 1427–1444. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw083>
- R2: Morrison, F., Cree, V.E., Ruch, G., Winter, K., Hadfield, M., and Hallett, S. (2019) Containment: exploring the concept of agency in children's statutory encounter with social workers, *Childhood*, 26(1): 98-112. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0907568218810101>
- R3: Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V.E., Hallett, S., Morrison, F., Hadfield, M., (2017) Making meaningful connections: using insights from social pedagogy in statutory child and family social work practice, *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(2): 1015 -1023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12321>
- R4: Hadfield, M., Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V. and Morrison, F. (2020) Social workers' reflexive understandings of their "everyday" communications with children, *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(2): 469–477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12703>
- R5: Ruch, G., Winter, K., Morrison, F., Hadfield, M., Hallett, S. and Cree, V. (2020) From Communication to Co-operation: Re-conceptualizing Social Workers' Engagement with Children in *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(2): 430-438. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12699>
- R6: Winter, K., Morrison, F., Cree, V.E., Ruch, G., Hadfield, M., and Hallett, S., (2019) Emotional labour in social workers' encounters with children and their families, *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(1): 217–233. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy016>

4. Details of the impact

Transforming social work practice through TLC practice development workshops, professional development digital resources and an ASYE module

In 2017, the University of Sussex delivered TLC practice workshops to social workers in Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC), and East Sussex County Council (ESCC). TLC colleagues in Scotland ran similar workshops for social workers in the City of Edinburgh and Fife County Council. Introducing practitioners to the TLC's 3Cs model and the TLC website's digital resources in these workshops supported the development of their conceptual understanding of, and practical skills in, communicating with children. Feedback included in the BHCC workshops evaluation report (S1) highlighted how the majority of the participants reported a marked improvement in their confidence in working with and listening to children. One practitioner's description of the significant shift in her professional mindset towards a more child-centred understanding of communication and engagement captured the workshops' overarching impact on the participants:

"At the beginning when I was doing assessment, I was talking to the parents and whenever I met the children, I am interviewing them rather than doing stuff with them. Now I've realised that I can actually play or do things with the children and actually still get information out of them, and I end up asking my questions within whatever we are doing.... So yes over the last 6-7 months there has been a noticeable change for me" (BHCC Newly Qualified Social Worker) (S1).

Around 50 social workers in total attended the workshops. On the (modest) calculation of each practitioner having, on average, 15 families in their caseload, often with two or three children per family, this suggests that the potential reach of these workshops' impact encompasses over 1500 children.

The creation of the TLC open access website (<http://www.talkingandlisteningtochildren.co.uk>), which includes online professional development resources that were co-created with social workers, has proved to be of wide-reaching and influential impact. Data analytics indicate that since the website's inception in 2015, in a typical year the site receives over 3000 visits by 2400 unique users (with the majority self-identifying as social workers) with approximately 1/5th returning twice more (S2a). Evidence of the TLC online reach includes adoption of the website's professional development resources by the academic lead for the social work qualifying programme at the University of South Australia who introduced it to 150 4th year students:

"I introduced the Talking and Listening to Children You-Tube videos to our website last year to guide students preparation and have found that the videos are a wonderful resource to help students understand the application of theory to practical aspects of social work with children. Students have a major assessment based on reflections on their role plays and I noted last year that they frequently drew on the Talking and Listening to children videos to inform their practice and reflections" (S2b).

The digital resources, comprising TLC findings, data and scenarios, have been a key influence on the curriculum design, content and delivery of the practice workshops (above) and the ASYE module (see below). A further tangible educational/professional development impact, arising directly from the TLC workshops, was the decision of the Principal Social Worker for Children and Families in BHCC to commission the University of Sussex to deliver a bespoke TLC research-informed ASYE academic module for newly qualified social workers:

"The feedback was positive about the impact this [the workshops] had on their practice with children and young people and especially how it helped practitioners reflect on this. In response to this we are now working with the University of Sussex to include the project as part of the module for our newly qualified social workers as it is an important part of supporting new workers to demonstrate how we prioritise direct work with children and young people in our model of practice" (S3a).

In the academic year 2019-20, twenty-five newly qualified BHCC social workers were enrolled on the new ASYE module structured around the TLC research. All the participants were given their own Kitbag, a child-centric resource designed to promote children's emotional wellbeing. Kitbag has supported social workers in embedding the TLC research findings in their practice by: (i) promoting a child-centred approach that understands each child and encounter as unique; (ii) equipping social workers with a bespoke resource to facilitate emotional wellbeing. Evidence from students (e.g. S3b) indicates that practitioners' engagement with the TLC research findings via their practical take-up of Kitbag has transformed their professional awareness and confidence and, more specifically, their child-centred communication and engagement skills. The BHCC's significant institutional investment represents a direct impact of the TLC research and demonstrates their ongoing commitment to embedding TLC research-informed approaches in their wider, relationship-based practice agenda.

In 2019 the TLC research findings were pivotal in the development of collaborative research impact partnerships with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the International Futures Forum (IFF), a small Scottish charity that created Kitbag. The BASW 80-20 relationship-based practice campaign is committed to recalibrating the time social workers spend in direct contact with children and families (currently only c.20% of their time) and as part of this initiative BASW endorsed the TLC digital online resources and Kitbag as core components of their campaign. In April 2019, the University of Sussex co-hosted with BASW a national 80-20 campaign conference. Over ninety social work practitioners and managers attended the event, heard about the TLC research findings and were introduced to Kitbag.

Following the 2019 conference, groups of childcare social workers in eight English local authorities were provided with Kitbags. Beginning in June 2019, a programme of TLC practice workshops was established in each local authority with follow-up workshops in 2020. More than 100 social workers, ranging from newly qualified to advanced practitioners, have taken part in

the workshops. The workshop feedback concurred with that derived from the practice workshops and ASYE module (above) and provides similar compelling evidence of the beneficial impact on practice of the TLC findings/the 3Cs model/Kitbag combination. Social workers have reported how their mindset and approach to communication with children have been radically altered and their low professional confidence about direct work (a concern identified by the TLC research) has been significantly boosted:

“I feel that this session has changed my mindset in terms of direct work. It has shown me how to incorporate the Kitbag and other tools for direct work in my everyday work. It has made me feel less fearful as I feel clearer on how to make my visits more meaningful” (S4).

In December 2020 a follow-up 80-20 TLC Kitbag Practice Week (held in lieu of a face-to-face conference owing to the Covid-19 pandemic) attracted 140 online participants to the keynote TLC Kitbag session. Overwhelmingly positive feedback from the event highlights the inspirational impact on practitioners of the TLC Kitbag message:

“Hope, the black bird. Even the wounded bird still sings... there is always hope and it opens the conversation from despair and trouble to hope for change. This is the nature of our work - we are change makers!” (S5).

Following the online BASW event and reflecting on the significance of the TLC research for local authority policy and practice, the BASW England National Director underlined the pivotal importance of resource-based approaches and training, for practice:

“Its reach into local authorities across England is making a vital contribution to raising awareness amongst social work practitioners and managers of the crucial importance of more time being spent in direct contact with children and families and helping this be achieved in practice” (S6).

Improving children’s and parents’ communication skills and interactions

Since the TLC impact work began, feedback provided to social workers from children and families has underlined how awareness of the TLC research findings and access to Kitbag has enabled social workers to support children and parents to have challenging conversations *with and about* each other:

“This led the family to start to have a conversation with one another about their feelings and what they need from each other. The family found the session really helpful and T’s (child’s name) wish was for everyone to have a Kitbag!” (S7).

Social workers have also reported how using Kitbag, in particular, has helped to open up meaningful conversations with children and parents living in challenging circumstances:

“We went through the cards and P said she wanted to pick some for her and then I could pick some. She knew what they all meant and was confident in picking some she could explain. After I had picked some she then asked to pick some for mum. Mum has been really ill from drinking, but things are getting better. P picked some which showed this, such as energy and courage, and then some such as trust and hope that helped her share that mum has had a slip up with drink again. I was then able to share this with mum in the Child in Need meeting which was really powerful to share the good things, and the ongoing worries and to help mum understand that P was sharing this rather than being directly asked about her drinking. P would like us to use this in the summer holidays at home with mum so that’s my next plan” (S8a).

In another instance a social worker described how the family “were inquisitive about the other parts of the Kitbag and asked if I could bring it again” (S8a). She went on to endorse how whilst working with the same family, Kitbag helped her to adopt a TLC-informed focus by identifying one of the children’s individual needs, which, in turn, benefitted the child:

“It helped me a lot, as one of the children is very quiet and is currently going through an assessment for potentially having some additional needs, this really opened up the session and he appeared to feel at ease and really enjoyed the session” (S8a).

For one eight-year-old girl with emotional regulation difficulties, her social worker could see how by recognising her individual needs and selecting the elements of Kitbag’s specifically intended

to address emotional regulation had a positive impact on her behaviour and their working relationship. Many children have requested that social workers bring the Kitbag with them on subsequent visits. Social workers have reported that parents have indicated their wish to purchase a Kitbag to help their family functioning.

Improving and impacting on organisational culture and the policy agenda

In February 2020, the University of Sussex successfully bid for Higher Education Innovation Fund monies and received £25K, which purchased 450 Kitbags for all the social workers and foster/family carers in two local authorities – BHCC and Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC). TLC workshops for Designated Kitbag Leads, facilitated by the University of Sussex and IFF, are producing powerful repeated qualitative evidence of the very positive impact on individual practice and organisational culture of the TLC research findings and the adoption of Kitbag. The RMBC Principal Social Worker has reported how the TLC research findings and introduction of Kitbag are showing dividends in terms of a healthy organisation and a happy and invested workforce:

“Since beginning this work with you it is noticeable that the organisation's commitment to direct contact with children and families has increased and social workers are demonstrating creative and customised ways of introducing the Kitbag to children and parents. Social workers have told me how children really enjoy using it in their meetings and how the Kitbag opens up conversations that otherwise would be much more difficult to have. Our colleagues within Nurture Units in schools have found the resource invaluable in respect of mindfulness and calming techniques for those children who really struggle to talk. Teams are really valuing using this tangible tool which elicits curiosity when they talk to children, and so it's having a positive impact on workforce morale too” (S8b).

Another successful funding application to the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (£107K, July 2020), underscores the reach of the TLC research impact into the policy arena. The funding will support the expansion of the TLC Kitbag practice intervention, with approx. 800 social workers and foster/kinship carers in a further four local authorities being provided with TLC training and with a Kitbag. Reporting in 2022, this unparalleled practice intervention will be subject to an independent randomised trial evaluation.

As a direct result of the TLC research findings and its collaboration with BASW, the University of Sussex has significantly raised the IFF's profile and brokered the introduction of Kitbag to a brand new market in England and Scotland. The distribution of mini Kitbags to 240 Children's Services frontline managers in 90 English Children's Services Departments via the Department of Education funded Practice Supervisors' Development Programme has elicited positive feedback, and in January 2021 the Principal Social Workers in all of the 151 Children's Services Departments in England will also receive a mini Kitbag. Total Kitbag sales attributable to the reach of the TLC project are currently in the region of 2000. (S9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1: Evaluation Report of TLC Action Inquiry Workshops, Jan 2018.

S2a: Google Analytics data for the Talking and Listening to Children website since 2015, provided by Horbury & Goffe

S2b: Email (11.03.20) Social Work Lead, University of South Australia.

S3a: Email (24.06.19) Principal Social Worker, Brighton and Hove CC.

S3b: Email (15.03.21) Social Worker, Brighton and Hove Children's Social Work Services.

S4: Email (25.10.19) Social worker feedback, Kent County Council workshop.

S5: Email (15.12.20) BASW TLC Kitbag Practice Week event feedback.

S6: Email (8.12.20) National Director, BASW England.

S7: Email/feedback sheet (7.1.20/2.8.19) Signs of Safety Lead, London Borough of Bexley.

S8a: Emails (15.7.19/9.12.19) Social Workers, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.

S8b: Email (8.12.20) Principal Social Worker, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.

S9: Letter (15.12.20) Director of Health Programmes, IFF, Scotland.