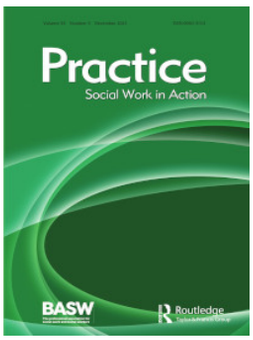

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Signs of Safety and the Paradox of Simplicity: Insights from Research with Social Work Students

Caroline White, Jo Bell and Lisa Revell

Signs of Safety (SOS) is a widely adopted approach in child protection internationally. However, very little is known about the effectiveness of students' learning and engagement with this approach. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore social work students' perceptions and experiences of SOS based on training and use of the approach during final practice placements. Interviews, focus groups, and surveys were undertaken at two time points: post-training and during placement. Findings highlighted student appreciation of SOS which was perceived as easy to use, promoting clear communication, and enabling collation of information within a simple structure. However, the perceived simplicity of SOS was also problematic in respect of recording information, and in developing balanced communication which facilitated relationship building, alongside skilful use of authority. These findings suggest that the apparent simplicity of the SOS framework, applied in the context of complex child protection and family work, can present a paradox for social work students. It is vital that, in adopting SOS, agencies do not seek to over-simplify a complicated and challenging area of practice, and that ongoing support from experienced practitioners is provided to enable novice social workers to apply this approach effectively.

Keywords: signs of safety; child protection; social work education

Introduction

This paper draws on research, commissioned by an English local authority, in which Signs of Safety (SOS) training was delivered to final year social work students, as part of a wider transformation agenda to improve social work practice in the area. The study examined students' responses to the training, experiences of implementing this in practice, and their perceptions of SOS. Whilst previous research has explored the effectiveness of teaching strengths-based,

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solution-focussed approaches to students (Toros, LaSala, and Medar 2016), none to date has been specific to SOS nor longitudinal in approach.

Originally developed in Australia, and currently used in diverse cultures and policy contexts, SOS is a strengths-based approach primarily used within child safeguarding. It is one of a number of practice frameworks, such as the Family Safeguarding Model (see Rodger, Allan, and Elliott 2020), designed to improve practice with, and outcomes for, children and families in or on the edge of social work interventions. Over the last decade the number of UK Local Authorities adopting practice frameworks has proliferated, in the wake of the Munro review of child protection (Munro 2011) and in response to clear endorsements from Ofsted and the Chief Social Worker for Children's Social Work in England (Baginsky, Ixer, et al. 2021). Approximately two-thirds of English local authorities use SOS as their overall practice framework, or use elements of this within their approach to child protection (Baginsky, Hickman, Moriarty, et al. 2020).

SOS positions constructive working relationships between families and practitioners as the cornerstone of effective child protection (Salveron et al. 2015; Turnell and Murphy 2017). It supports families to understand the reasons for professional concern through clear articulation of the issues, whilst avoiding unnecessary professional jargon (Bunn 2013; Baginsky, Hickman, Moriarty, et al. 2020). SOS mapping tools encourage practitioners to work alongside families to address identified risks and uncertainties, whilst bolstering strengths, protective factors and safety networks (Skrypek, Idzelis, and Pecora 2012). Scaling tools enable practitioners to benchmark concerns and monitor improvement, whilst the formulation of 'Danger Statements' enables practitioners to clearly articulate the potential impact of adverse parenting behaviours. Such approaches establish shared understandings of the need for change, facilitating the creation of clear goals, which reduce the need for social work intervention, and increase parents' ability to care safely.

The focus on strengths, as well as concerns, is a central plank of SOS, which recognises parents as caring and capable of change (Keddell 2014), thereby fostering motivation. The framework also supports decision making when risks outweigh signs of safety, enabing practitioners to communicate the reasons for consequent actions more clearly to parents (Keddell 2014). In seeking to recognise and build on family strengths, SOS contrasts with much child protection practice which has been criticised as overly preoccupied with risk (Jones 2014; Stanley and Mills 2014; Featherstone et al. 2018).

It is unclear why SOS has been adopted so widely. However, research by Baginsky et al. (2017) documented a broad range of reasons given for its uptake by UK local authorities. These included changing the organisational culture; improving consistency of practice; empowering families; simplifying existing systems; improving understanding of risk and risk management; supporting practitioner morale, skills development, recruitment and retention. This diversity suggests recognition of the need for extensive change within

child protection, and high expectations of SOS to drive improvements in practice.

Despite its reported benefits, there are also criticisms of SOS. These relate to practice limitations, and the robustness of the evidence base to support claims of its efficacy. In practice, some social workers have expressed concern about the approach being unduly optimistic and diverting attention from children (Stanley and Mills 2014); others identified situations in which they find using SOS challenging or inappropriate, for example in families they identified as 'chaotic' or 'high risk'(Baginsky, Hickman, Moriarty, et al. 2020). Moreover, further concerns have been raised suggesting that erroneous decisions could be reached when practitioners struggle to evidence harm within the framework provided; that SOS may result in children remaining at home longer than is safe; that it may be ineffective in working with 'chronic neglect' (Idzelis Rothe, Nelson-Dusek, and Skrypek 2013; Revell 2019). Revell (2019) also highlighted that whilst SOS enabled practitioners to have difficult conversations with parents, there was a danger that it could become yet another standardised tool which stifled, rather than enhanced, professional judgement. In effect, the streamlined framework used to capture the three main elements of SOS (what are we worried about, what's going well and what needs to happen) belies the complexity of data collection and analysis and, as outlined by Baginsky, Manthorpe, et al. (2021), may result in vital information being excluded, particularly by novice practitioners who have not benefitted from a grounding in more in-depth, holistic assessment.

The growing prevalence of SOS in practice appears out of step with the evidence base for its efficacy. It has been criticised as under-researched, with over-reliance on small scale evaluations, which have often lacked independence, such that, 'support for SOS has tended to rest heavily on practice wisdom rather than research-based evidence' (Baginsky, Moriarty, and Manthorpe 2019, 108). SOS is a complex intervention, not rigorously defined, and may be implemented differently in different care systems and areas, all of which make establishing its efficacy difficult (Bunn 2013; Reekers et al. 2018; Sheehan et al. 2018). Baginsky et al. (2017) undertook a largescale independent evaluation of SOS practice within ten English pilot sites. This provided multiple perspectives from managers, social workers, and parents, but did not enable the measurement of long-term outcomes or the establishment of any linkage between SOS and outcomes (Baginsky, Hickman, Moriarty, et al. 2020; Baginsky, Moriarty, and Manthorpe 2019). Similarly, Idzelis Rothe, Nelson-Dusek, and Skrypek (2013) questioned the longer-term outcomes, in particular, whether families continue to benefit from the established safety networks. Baginsky, Hickman, Harris, et al. (2020) subsequently found no strong evidence that SOS improved outcomes for children and families, or impacted on staff turnover. While the approach was liked by social workers, they concluded that practitioner skill and competence were more significant than the specific approach used, and that adoption of SOS did not lead to consistent

improvements in practice. Further independent work to strengthen the evidence base for SOS is required.

To our knowledge, no work to date has addressed social work students' perspectives of SOS. These are important because, as emerging members of the social work profession, they are well positioned to gauge the usefulness of the approach and its application to practice, as well as contributing to our understanding of learning needs for new and inexperienced workers. In the light of emerging critical commentaries on SOS, our findings provide a timely addition, identifying strengths and limitations from the perspectives of a previously neglected group.

The Training Initiative

The training and research programme was initiated by an English local authority which had secured government innovation funding to transform its culture and approach to safeguarding children and effect changes in the ways it supported children and families within and on the edges of the child protection system. They experienced high levels of children in need, children in need of protection and an increasing need for services, a situation reflective of the picture across the UK, where high numbers of children are represented in the child welfare system (Bilson and Martin 2016). Underpinning the transformation programme was the introduction of approaches to working with children and families which sought to strengthen family participation and resources. In common with other UK local authorities, which have frequently adopted practice frameworks as part of their 'transformation plans' (Baginsky, Ixer, et al. 2021), the study site adopted SOS as one of the new approaches to be employed by social workers and the wider multiagency network. In addition to seeking to improve practice, the local authority sought to address high staff turnover, a problem shared with children and family services throughout the UK, and elsewhere, in what is recognised to be a stressful area of practice (Healy, Meagher, and Cullin 2007; McFadden et al. 2019; Department for Education 2019). Therefore, in addition to training and supporting established social workers to use SOS, they sought to ensure that incoming workers were equipped with the relevant skills and understanding to work within the 'transformed' model of service delivery. They therefore collaborated with a partner University on a programme in which senior practitioners from the local authority planned and delivered bespoke training to social work students, whilst University researchers explored student perceptions and experiences of learning and subsequent application on placement.

The training and research were conducted within a University social work department offering undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate (MA) programmes. SOS training workshops were offered to all final year students, with training provided separately to BA and MA cohorts. As a research project, participation

Table 1. Themes identified from the full data set.

Phase one – post training phase	Theme 1 – Quality, pace and delivery of training
	Theme 2 – Underpinning philosophy and values
	Theme 3 – Development of knowledge and skills
	Theme 4 – How training fits into the programme
	Theme 5 – Development of confidence and resources
	Theme 6 – Learning in small groups
Phase two – placement phase	Theme 7 – Opportunities for implementation
	Theme 8 – Perceived strengths of SOS
	Theme 9 – Reflections on the initial training
	Theme 10 – Challenges in using the approache in practice

was optional, and not part of students' coursework. Workshops lasted for a full day, and focussed on the underpinning philosophy of SOS, as well as skills development. The project was repeated the following year, with a second student group (Cohort 2).

Training occurred prior to students' final placements. These were conducted in diverse contexts, including the authority which delivered the training and in which SOS was a cornerstone of practice, as well as in other local authorities and providers, such as health and voluntary and community agencies. Therefore, the extent to which agencies were engaged in SOS was highly varied.

Methods

Qualitative methods were selected since they are well suited to exploratory research and enable the collection of rich, in-depth data focussing on participant perceptions and experiences within under-explored areas (Snape and Spencer 2003; Bowling 2014).

All students undertaking the training were invited to participate in the research to share their perspectives and reflections at two timepoints; after completion of the training (post-training phase), and during placement (placement phase; 6–9 months after the training).

At each phase students were asked to complete a survey which collected demographic data and information about placement types, as well as data about student experiences and perceptions through open-ended questions.

Table 2. Two – students participating in training and data collection activities.

	MA Cohorts	BA Cohorts	Total
Number attending initial training	23	14	37
Number completing post-training survey	13	14	27
Number completing in-depth interview / FG post training	9	5	14
Number completing placement survey	8	8	16
Number completing in-depth interview / FG during placement	9	4	13

Surveys were available online and as hard copy; they were completed anonymously, with completion taken to imply consent.

Students were also invited to attend a focus group (FG) or individual interview during each phase of data collection. Written consent was sought prior to participation. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30–90 min, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The post-training phase explored students' views about SOS, the quality and value of the training; what they learned; impacts on their feelings about forthcoming placements. At the placement phase students were asked to reflect on their opportunities to use the skills and knowledge acquired; the perceived usefulness of the training on placement; any difficulties using SOS; their perceptions of SOS as an approach from a placement perspective.

Data from the survey, FGs and interviews were combined and analysed as a single data set, using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), to identify key themes within the data at each phase. The themes identified are outlined in Table 1.

In this paper we focus on findings from themes 2, 3, 8 and 10 which highlight student reflections and perceptions of SOS based on their training and application in practice. We pay particular attention to the perceived simplicity and clarity of SOS as a significant concept highlighted across themes, and the potential associated benefits and risks. Taken alongside other emerging research, our analysis raises questions about how students, and others new to this approach, align the complexities of their work with the perceived simplicity of SOS.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, at the University of Hull.

Findings

Participants

Table 2 details the numbers of students who participated in the training and data collection.

Post-Training Phase

Underpinning Philosophy and Values. The training afforded students opportunities to explore the philosophies and approaches which inform SOS, including 'working with' families, rather than 'doing things for' them; recognising individuals' expertise in respect of their lives and circumstances; using strength-based approaches. Additionally, it revisited core social work values, which were part of the students' wider training programme, such as empowerment, empathy and anti-oppressive practice.

Students appreciated the alignment of SOS with these values and the underlying focus on strengths, as well as problems, and suggested that the approach facilitated open and honest working with families:

> It … didn't just look at what was going wrong but really looked at what was working well and existing strengths and existing safety, so it was a really balanced approach to child protection casework (Cohort 1, FG).

> The main values I feel are the importance of working 'with' people, building respectful and honest relationships. Individuals are the experts on their own lives (Cohort 1, Survey)

Development of Knowledge and Skills. This theme captures students' responses about their knowledge and skill development, and their reflections on SOS as a framework they could draw upon in future practice.

Students reported that they had had the opportunity to develop the knowledge and practice skills which underpin SOS; such as using scaling questions, developing safety plans, writing danger or worry statements. Further, they had explored the importance of clear communication with families, the need for accessible language, and ensuring that families understand social workers' concerns and expectations. Some highlighted the importance of clear communication as one of the most important things they learned during the training. SOS was perceived to help promote transparent communication with families, through collating and presenting information clearly and systematically:

> As professionals we get lost in jargon, but a lot of the families don't actually know what we're talking about. … .when you're giving the Worry Statement you're putting it in really simple language that they … understand … and the families know what they need to change (Cohort 2, FG).

They signalled that the training had helped them prepare for their placements and future practice, enabling them to approach these with a greater sense of confidence and preparedness.

Students perceived SOS as a useful practice framework, which was easy to operationalise:

> Signs of Safety is a process that … for me is easy to follow (Cohort 2, FG).

Some identified simplicity as a strength of SOS, which appeared to facilitate their understanding of family circumstances:

> I just like the simplicity of it … it was just really, really straightforward (Cohort 1, FG).

> It's just really simple because they're just using the information that you've got and not thinking about like all your hypotheses and try and understand what's going on, in the background, just sitting there and what have I got? What … do I have right now? And getting all that mapped down (Cohort 2, FG).

Paradoxically, one focus group identified that this simplicity was challenging for some students, who, for example, experienced difficulty writing clear 'worry/danger' statements:

> What I struggled with was its simplicity … looking at worry statements and danger statements … I think everybody [in the group] was looking too deep into the information that was there. And actually, the principle behind it is a lot of simplifying the language and keeping it simple ….so … I think we all sort of fell victim to trying to … over-complicate it …. (Cohort 1, FG).

Some also anticipated challenges in applying SOS and its founding principles in practice. For example, this student foresaw difficulties when working in complex situations, where they might be required to move from exploring family strengths to a more challenging and authoritative approach:

> I find … the idea of it really difficult … a lot of the things that we talk about are great on paper but when you're faced with … something really awful going on, to try and pull out the strengths first and to be open and honest … is really difficult because to say to somebody, look, if this doesn't change … this is probably going to end up going, [to] child protection … it's just [a] really awkward situation …. you'll have a very … open and honest relationship … and then suddenly you pull out the authoritarian bit … it just tilts the relationship a little bit I think (Cohort 1, FG).

The difficulties of articulating concerns to families was noted by another student, who reflected both on the training and their experience through previous employment:

> To go out and discuss the ….danger statement sometimes ….can … be quite a scary thing for families and for yourself but you can see it was so clear and

> that process led to a really good outcome so you could see that having that, that's such an important skill for social workers….to be open, honest and … really clear about worries (Cohort 1, FG).

Placement Phase

Most students reported the training had helped them while on placement, and that they had used SOS. Participants indicated that the training helped increase their confidence, and gave them knowledge and skills which enabled them to 'hit the ground running', providing insight into was required and how to formulate the relevant paperwork. Others described using the training in a more general way, for example to guide their thinking.

Perceived Strengths of SOS. Participants highlighted aspects of SOS which they perceived as valuable. For some, SOS provided a systematic framework which enabled practitioners to structure information and thinking, plan interventions and enable progress to be monitored:

> That framework is really helpful … it's straight to the point … you can get lost in all the things that are happening in a family sometimes … (Cohort 1, FG)

> It clearly states in your chronology where you are and what the worries are and are they continued six months down the line? So, because you can see that pattern really well, without having to read through and go through all the notes. You can really see where the worries are and what the progress has been (Cohort 2, Interview).

SOS was also perceived as a clear and effective means of sharing information about concerns and family strengths with other practitioners, managers and families:

> It's good to get documented … it does help the social workers, it does help people that are reading it, like the higher managements and even in court proceedings to clearly see, and I do think it does help the families when they initially come to read the assessment (Cohort 2, Interview).

Further, SOS appeared to help social workers understand families' perspectives:

> I found scaling is….a very good way….of obtaining where the families think they're at (Cohort 1, FG).

The clarity of the recording format also appeared to help social workers understand and build on work undertaken by colleagues:

> I've done a couple of chronologies recently…. been known to the service for quite a while, and before Signs of Safety was implemented the case notes

> were really quite hectic, they go from one thing to another. And it's quite unclear to see … what's actually happened, what are the concerns and is there any strengths …. So being able to look back at it and think oh that was basically what we are worried about, what's going to happen and what protective factors (Cohort 1, FG).

> If you're going out …. and someone's asked you to do some work on something and you haven't got to trawl through loads of stuff (Cohort 1, FG).

The emphasis on strengths, in addition to worries, and the focus on careful articulation of concerns and avoiding jargon continued to be perceived as valuable:

> There's also a focus on what's working well and that was never present before … and that does help because it's not just … here's a list of things you've got to do, go away and do it. It's very much … this is what is good, we want to see more of that and less of that … I think that works well with parents … I've seen people accept … what people are worried about because of that (Cohort 1, FG).

> It's clear and, and it helps you to word things in … not … such a negative way … And it's approaching it in quite a positive language ….that's really important to empower people and motivate them to make change (Cohort 2, Interview).

The awareness and acknowledgement of family strengths and potential risks enabled practitioners to clearly assess the level of concern; this student outlined how, in a case in which some professionals were sceptical about social worker concerns, SOS mapping had enabled recognition of significant risks within a family:

> We mapped it, and all these concerns came out … so yes, there are these strengths but then when you looked at the list of what we're worried about that was massive …. it just highlights everything and then … it went from everyone was, 'oh, it's fine' … to 'okay, it's going to be child protection' (Cohort 1, FG).

Challenges in Using the Approach in Practice. The post-training feedback indicated that the simplicity of SOS (which was valued by many) was a challenge for some. This paradox extended into the placement phase; one participant observed that some social workers 'struggled with the simplicity of it', and another noted the difficulties they experienced in learning to write clear and precise statements:

> Not very long into placement I wrote some worry statements and the first one I did I struggled … and I still was aware it had to be simple but you very easily fall back … into the odd, the words …. the terminology … (Cohort 1, FG).

Whilst the simplicity of SOS was appreciated by these students, their responses also indicate a need for support to learn the skills of presenting information in a clear, uncluttered style, as well as opportunities to practice doing so.

Discussion

This study explored social work students' perceptions of SOS from the dual perspectives of initial training and placement, contrasting with previous SOS research, which has explored the experiences of qualified practitioners. This study therefore extends the knowledge base by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of those at the beginning of their practice journeys.

As a conceptual framework, SOS supported students to understand how the tenets of relationship-based practice could be realised through transparency and jargon-free language, enabling the development of a shared understanding with families and a mutual commitment to change. The data indicates that during training SOS was readily appreciated by students as an approach which would be valuable in practice; they felt this to be an 'easy to use' approach, which fitted well with social work values of clear communication, and recognising strengths. Nonetheless, some challenges in using SOS in practice were anticipated, indicating that some students were critically reflecting on the approaches. The placement data suggested that students' initial positive appraisals were reinforced, and that they had developed more in-depth and sophisticated reflections on SOS through practice. They continued to perceive SOS as an accessible framework which enabled them to reflect on complex situations, and to assess the balance of risk and safety within families. Through experience, they recognised that it provided a helpful framework to facilitate communication with families and practitioners, enabling them to clearly articulate their concerns, and gain insight into families' perspectives. Student views aligned with those of qualified social workers (Baginsky, Moriarty, and Manthorpe 2019), suggesting that SOS is an approach valued by practitioners with different levels of experience and expertise.

Data analysis at both phases led us to observe two related concepts: clarity and simplicity. These appear important elements of SOS, perceived as enabling social workers to structure their thinking and record their findings using a clear format, within which complex information can be distilled; this was appreciated by the students. However, this data, and our reflections upon it, also pointed to some concerns. These related to difficulties in presenting information clearly within the assessment framework; managing the balance between communication which facilitated relationship building with that which enabled the assertion of authority; risks that in distilling information, complexities might be overlooked.

Some students found writing clear safety and danger statements at odds with the ways they were used to presenting information; this was a skill they needed support to develop, and opportunities to practice. Baginsky, Manthorpe, et al. (2021) suggest that such difficulties may extend to experienced practitioners. Their research highlighted concerns about the adequacy of many SOS assessments, which they found to have limited analysis and explanatory information or examination of the impact of parents' behaviours on children. While SOS may provide clarity, there is therefore a risk that its implementation could be formulaic (Baginsky, Hickman, Harris, et al. 2020). Students indicated that using information within SOS assessments meant that they did not have to 'trawl through loads of stuff' or 'think about all your hypotheses', suggesting they may dispense with reading in-depth file recordings in favour of accessible summaries outlining the main concerns. The risk in doing so, is that practitioners rely on a snap-shot view of presenting concerns, rather than a 'video over time' (Horwath 2005) which provides a more nuanced picture of parenting capacity derived from an understanding of family functioning over an extended period. There is therefore a clear need for an approach to using practice frameworks which enables practitioners to make sense of complexity so that patterns can be seen and concerns/signs of safety observed, whilst avoiding over-simplification.

SOS emphasises the need for social workers to develop constructive relationships with families, building on strengths, while taking effective action when risks outweigh these, and communicating the reasons for their actions clearly. This requires excellent and nuanced communication skills and interactions with families. However, research into strengths-based approaches, from which SOS was derived, identified that social workers can struggle to move between collaborative working and use of authority when required (Oliver and Charles 2015, 2016). Despite these difficulties, they found that a small number of social workers had adopted what they termed 'firm, fair and friendly' practice, in which they appeared to successfully navigate difficult relationships, and set boundaries, using 'a delicate balance of authority and collaboration' (Oliver and Charles 2016, 1015). They identified however, that such practitioners were in the minority, and among those most experienced, suggesting that this way of working is not easy to achieve. Therefore, the challenge identified by one student in our study in moving from an 'open and honest relationship' to one in which they are required to 'pull out the authoritarian bit' appears to represent very real difficulty and discomfort for social workers. This may signal the need for social work educators to provide students with further support to navigate such exchanges and fully appreciate that forging positive relationships with families and highlighting their strengths is not diametrically opposed to skilful use of authority. Similar support may also be required by more experienced practitioners, when adopting SOS.

We suggest that the paradox of simplicity in SOS would benefit from further investigation. As a framework it appears to be valued for its simplicity, yet the child protection context in which it is applied is anything but simple. It is

instead a complex system in which social workers have to work with considerable uncertainty, navigate complex relationships with and within families and with other professionals, and make difficult decisions which impact significantly on the lives of children and families; further they are exposed to external scrutiny and judgement when there are poor outcomes (Forrester et al. 2008; Hood 2015; Oliver and Charles 2016; McFadden et al. 2019; Munro 2019; McCafferty and Taylor 2022; Ravalier et al. 2021). This paradox of simplicity may not be a problem specific to SOS, but rather a feature of any practice model if not implemented in a sufficiently nuanced and robust manner, and so such research could be further extended to other models.

Baginsky, Manthorpe, et al. (2021) suggest that the apparent simplicity of SOS may be a key 'selling point' for local authorities who may perceive SOS as a way of simplifying a complex area of practice, enabling them to address issues associated with high levels of staff turnover and inexperienced staff, and that this might account for its wide-scale appeal and adoption. Thus, if SOS is to be used to its full potential, it appears important that local authorities engage with this framework in a more nuanced way, in which, despite the apparent simplicity of the tools provided and the clarity of the conceptual map, it is not used to oversimplify complex family histories nor the complex practice landscape.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the study was that student perspectives were sought at two timepoints, reflecting the importance of learning, and the implementation of knowledge and skills in practice.

However, some students participated at one time-point only, and due to the anonymised completion of the survey it was not possible to link and track individual student data across the study. Collecting the data in a format that enabled such linkage would have supported a more nuanced examination of experiences and shifts in perspective over time.

No baseline assessment of students' pre-existing knowledge was undertaken, so the extent to which their knowledge and skills increased cannot be ascertained.

Participants were a self-selecting group, who were motivated to access additional teaching. The inclusion of a wider range of students, through mandatory training, may have highlighted further issues. Not all placements were in child protection, although some applied insights from the training in other settings.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into the perspectives of social work students, extending the evidence base in respect of SOS. SOS was perceived to offer an

effective means of structuring students' thinking and communication, at a time when they were developing competence in their approach to assessment and intervention. They demonstrated similar understandings of the potential benefits of this approach to those reported by more experienced practitioners. In addition, there was evidence that some students were undertaking a deeper approach to learning by critically reflecting on the realities of applying their knowledge in the complex world of practice. The findings also highlight important messages for practitioners, managers and those providing training, in respect of the paradox of simplicity within the SOS framework. It is essential that in seeking to simplify the assessment paperwork that they do not – falsely – seek to simplify social work thinking. Instead, such frameworks should seek to enhance and augment professional judgement and decision making, not replace it. As outlined by Gibson (2014, 77) 'the SOS approach is simple in its focus but sophisticated in its application'. Ongoing support and guidance are required during and beyond early training to enable practitioners to use this approach in complex settings and relationships, to develop and refine the skills needed to work with strengths while maintaining authority and boundaries, ensuring that the 'sophisticated application' noted by Gibson is achieved.

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