

Threshold Concepts in Residential Child Care: Part 1, The Selves of Learners and their Praxis

Abstract

Despite growing international consensus around the complex and demanding nature of residential child care for children and young people, consensus is lacking around how to develop a workforce equal to the task. Threshold concept theory casts a light on related issues of training and education and offers direction in addressing them. Threshold concepts are central concepts in a given discipline which are transformative but troublesome for many. They are important to their given discipline because they shape thinking and practice, but they are often difficult to master. This first of a two-part paper discusses the first of a two-stage, transatlantic study aimed at identifying and exploring threshold concepts in residential child care. Using focus groups and individual interviews with participants who had studied, practiced and/or taught in the UK, Canada or the US, it explored the views and experiences of educators who have contributed to knowledge production in the field, as well as front-line practitioners who have completed a dedicated course in child and youth care, residential child care or therapeutic child care. Findings included unanimous agreement about the relevance of threshold concept theory to their experiences and strong support for its utility in considering how curricula should be taught. There was a greater degree of commonality than divergence between educator and practitioner views about what might be threshold, with *relational practice* the most prominently discussed. A theme around the self of the learner was identified in discussions of threshold concept theory more generally, particularly across the educator focus groups. Implications for pedagogical practice are discussed, including the concept of praxis which provides a useful counterpoint for conceptualising the relationship between threshold concept theory and the use of self in practice, especially in fields where the self is a primary instrument of the work.

Key words: residential child care, threshold concepts, use of self, relational practice, relationship boundaries, praxis

1. Introduction

Ameliorative care of children and young people who have experienced abuse, neglect or other trauma requires a robust set of skills, knowledge and personal fortitude. Consensus is growing internationally about this requirement (Holden, 2009; Smith, 2017; Whittaker, del Valle, & Holmes, 2015a), with related qualifications emerging in some countries and already well-established in others. Consensus is lacking and evidence limited, however, for determining what should constitute related training and education. Threshold concept theory holds promise for providing direction and coherence. Threshold concepts are core concepts in a given discipline which, amongst other things, tend to be troublesome for educators and students, but also transformative once grasped. While substantial empirical evidence supports the identification of threshold concepts in at least 170 disciplinary or professional contexts (Land, Rattray, & Vivian, 2014), identification of threshold concepts in social work and child and youth care is sparse and limited to thought pieces (Foote, 2013; Marsh & White, 2016; Morgan, 2012; Steckley, 2013). This two-part article discusses a transatlantic study that breaks new ground by establishing the relevance of threshold concept theory and identifying potential threshold concepts in one intersection of social work and child and youth care – residential child care. First, however, it explains the professional contexts within which the study took place and highlights the pressing need for a stronger evidence base that can theoretically inform curricular development to better support workforce development. A summary of threshold concept theory follows, along with an argument for its potential to illuminate the development of *praxis*, which, for those unfamiliar with the concept, can be thought of as *the ethical synthesis of knowing, doing and being in practice*. The methodology and methods of this (two-stage) study are set forth, followed by a discussion of the findings of stage one and implications for pedagogic practice, including a consideration of educators' praxis as an important parallel with practitioners' praxis.

1.1 Context

Across national boundaries numerous concerns endure regarding residential child care, including a limited evidence base to support its efficacy, its high cost relative to other forms of intervention, accounts of current and historic abuse, perceptions of foreclosed opportunities for healthy attachment, and poor outcomes for care leavers subsequent to their residential placement compared to the general population (Whittaker, del Valle, & Holmes, 2015b). Related research and funding are similarly limited, especially research that focuses on developing models for the delivery

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of therapeutic residential child care (Whittaker et al., 2016). These concerns have resulted in a similarly enduring dominant discourse that locates residential child care as a last resort (Knorth, Harder, Zandberg, & Kendrick, 2008), which perpetuates the aforementioned concerns and maintains a vicious cycle.

Despite attempts to reduce or even eradicate its use (see Ainsworth & Hansen, 2009; or the Fife Inquiry, 1992 for telling examples of deleterious or even disastrous consequences), the needs of some children and young people continue to be best served by high quality residential child care (Kendrick, 2015), with a significant proportion indicating a preference for it over foster care (Anglin, 2002; Lawlor, 2008; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1999). Yet too many children and young people must “fail their way” into residential care (Whittaker et al., 2015a, p. 330), creating placement instability, compromising opportunities for the development of secure attachments (Furnivall, 2011; Mann-Feder, 2019) and harming psychological, mental and neurobiological development (Eggersten, 2008).

In an attempt to address many of the concerns discussed above, residential child care has been subject to processes associated with professionalization – in the United Kingdom (UK) as part of social work and social care (Smith, 2017), and as part of child and youth care in other parts of the world (White, 2007). Child and youth care workers and residential child care workers are increasingly developing what can be deemed professional identities related to their work (Gharabaghi, 2010; Smith, 2017), and these identities are often fostered by what they encounter in their qualifying courses. The content and delivery of those qualifications, then, is of significant importance in developing a workforce equal to the task of caring for some of our most disadvantaged and hurt children.

Yet consensus is lacking about what should constitute “right” content for purposes of qualifying the workforce, with a myriad of competing and even contradictory conceptual frameworks (Ranahan, Blanchet-Cohen, & Mann-Feder, 2015). This is due, in part, to the relatively “unsettled” (Wimshurst, 2011) educational boundaries of residential child care given its fledgling process of professionalization, multidisciplinary nature, poor disciplinary status (Smith, 2009) and differing disciplinary locations internationally. In the UK and parts of North America (particularly parts of the US), residential child care is considered a form of social work. In North America (particularly Canada), South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, residential child care is often located in the separate and distinct discipline of child and youth care. In many parts of continental Europe, it is located in the distinct discipline of social pedagogy – a discipline attracting increasing attention in education and service provision here in the UK and in parts of the child and youth care community internationally (Coussee, Bradt, Roose, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008). Indeed, hybrid ways of thinking

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and practicing are strongly facilitated by the increasingly accessible ways they can be shared (i.e., more accessible online practice literature, online forums for direct communication across distances, cheaper travel costs for international conferences and other forms of collaboration), with many authors cited here drawing from two or all three of the aforementioned traditions. As will be seen below, these increasingly accessible ways of sharing can also facilitate novel approaches to related research.

Despite the enrichment brought by this hybridization, students and practitioners struggle to meaningfully integrate theory and practice (Collingwood, Emond, & Woodward, 2008), with concerning gaps between what is espoused in the literature and what actually happens in the field (Holden, 2009; Modlin, 2015). Phelan (2000) notes the immobilizing sensory overload experienced by students on placement and newly-qualified practitioners, describing how they instead turn to “common sense” explanations and approaches. Collingwood et al. (2008, p. 73) report a sense amongst students that theory is “a university requirement rather than an aid to practice; a hindrance rather than a help.” This lack of integration or even rejection of a theoretically informed basis for understanding and decision-making has concerning consequences – not only for the development of the workforce, but for the care experiences and outcomes of children and young people.

More than knowledge is needed. Within any practice-based curriculum, the development of skills, along with values, perspectives and other personal characteristics, must also be fostered. In addressing the complex, messy nature of child and youth care practice and how educators might re-think professional education, White (2007, p. 231) offers the concept of praxis, defined as “ethical, self-aware, responsive and accountable action [that] involves the reciprocal integration of knowing, doing and being” (p. 231). The notion of praxis, she argues, better reflects the complexities of practice, can hold multiple ways of knowing, helps to “collapse” the distinction between theory and practice, and offers some traction for what she and others have argued is an overemphasis on technical-rational approaches to education (Ruch, 2000; Schon, 1983; Smith, 2017). It also makes the ethical dimension of practice more explicit. Praxis moves us to a more sophisticated understanding of what is traditionally thought of as the gap between theory and practice; instead, a more dynamic integration of aspects of the self of the practitioner and her learning is reflected here. Expanding the notion further, White, Kouri, and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2017) describe *politicized praxis* that is necessarily supported by a child and youth care education that – in addition to traditional content around the cultivation of individualised, caring relationships with children and families – engages with the political, social and economic realities of today’s world. Rather than relegating issues such as racism, colonialism, globalised neoliberal capitalism, extreme inequality and

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environmental destruction neatly into a child or family's macro-system, they argue that developing politicized praxis involves implicating ourselves with and seeing our complicity in these realities. Focusing on residential child care in a UK social work context, Smith (2017, p. 175) takes up a similar definition of praxis as "a form of ethically committed action which realises the good at which it aims through the process of caring." He argues that residential child carers' professional identity, and thus their praxis, must be grounded in a relational ontology that holds the uncertainties, messiness and emotionality of care.

Given the strong, international consensus around the centrality of good relationships between practitioners and children (Kendrick, Steckley, & McPheat, 2011), as well as the growing evidence linking practitioner characteristics and positive outcomes (Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly, & Byford, 2009; Stuart & Carty, 2006), who and how practitioners *are* in their relationships with their young charges is as of much importance as what they know – and from a praxis perspective, the two are inextricably comingled. Even under optimal circumstances, relationships between carers and cared-for are often complex and taxing. The psychological and behavioral effects of neglect, abuse, trauma and/or chronic stress, which most children in residential care must contend with (Kendrick, 2012; Pecora & English, 2016), significantly increase the complexities of these relationships. They can bewilder or agitate, triggering intense and difficult emotions. On their own, common sense responses are at best inadequate; at worst, they are the basis of counterproductive or even damaging responses. Wider contexts that emphasize technical-rational orientations to practice (Schon, 1983), measurable outcomes, the avoidance of risk, and simplistic notions of "best practice" certainty further exacerbate these difficulties (Steckley & Smith, 2011). What is needed of practitioners requires not only a shift in how relationships, behavior and children themselves are understood, but for many, a more fundamental shift in relation to beliefs and identity. The need for curricula that effectively supports practitioners' development of knowing, doing *and* being, then, is particularly compelling.

1.2 Threshold Concept Theory

Although a range of educational theories exist that might be applied to residential child care, threshold concept theory is particularly strong in its illumination of the affective dimensions and identity work inherent in the development of praxis. Indeed, it speaks a similar language to that of praxis and can illuminate the development and delivery of curricula that facilitates it. The threshold concepts theoretical framework has been applied in 45 countries across 259 subject areas (Land,

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Meyer, & Flanagan, 2016). In their seminal paper, Meyer and Land (2003) distinguish threshold concepts from core concepts in any given discipline by their five defining characteristics; they are: transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome. Because a threshold concept enables new ways of thinking and understanding, once grasped, it has a *transformative* effect on the learner. A threshold concept is *irreversible* in that (again, once grasped) it is difficult or impossible to forget it. Its *integrative* nature illuminates relationships between ideas or phenomena, and it helps to define disciplinary or subject boundaries (i.e., is *bounded*). Finally, a threshold concept can be counter-intuitive, difficult to grasp, tacit and/or challenging to pre-existing ways of understanding and therefore *troublesome* (Meyer & Land, 2003). This troublesomeness is often the most immediately recognizable characteristic of threshold concepts.

A previous exploration of life-space as a threshold concept (Steckley, 2013) is a useful illustrative example to vivify these characteristics. In coming to understand what it means to practice from a life-space perspective, practitioners must shift from an individual case work or groupwork orientation (Keenan, 1991; Redl & Wineman, 1952) to taking “as the theatre for the work the actual living situations as shared with and experienced by the child” (Ainsworth, 1981, p. 234). Their fundamental orientation to the work is transformed, leading to an irreversible change in how practitioners *are* with young people (Smith, 2008). Life-space integrates other core concepts from child and youth care, including the use of the everyday for developmental gain (Trieschman, Whittaker, & Brendtro, 1969), “doing with” rather than “doing to” (Garfat, 2001), and emotional presence (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011). Understanding practice through the lens of life-space helps to distinguish the work of child and youth care from field social work or counselling, demarcating related subject boundaries. Finally, practitioners can fail to grasp the significance of the concept, thereby lacking intentionality, missing therapeutic opportunities and mistakenly thinking they are only doing something useful when counselling young people (Allsopp, 2007). In other words, the concept of life-space can be troublesome.

Once students have encountered troublesome knowledge (in any field of study), a period of liminality often ensues. Land, Cousin, Meyer, and Davies (2005, p. 55) describe this as “an ‘in-between’ state in which they [learners] oscillate between earlier, less sophisticated understandings, and the fuller appreciation of a concept.” Some students can become stuck in this liminal state, never moving beyond mimicry of understanding; others may abandon the related learning entirely (Cousin, 2010). Understanding this liminality is significant to residential child care for two reasons. First, the previously mentioned gap between theory and practice can be seen as a form of mimicking

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theoretically-informed practice; while mimicry can reflect early stages of understanding, some students and practitioners never move beyond it. This has serious implications for the children and young people in residential child care, given their aforementioned histories, the history of abuse in care and an increasingly risk-averse culture that may well foster a different kind of abuse (Howath, 2000). Second, residential child care's historic difficulty in retaining qualified staff may well stem, at least in part, from practitioners seeking more gratifying (or at least tolerable) work due to never fully coming to grasp those concepts which support task satisfaction (Menzie Lyth, 1988). Developing and delivering curricula that more effectively supports an integration of knowing, doing and being has a much stronger potential for closing this gap.

The overriding emphasis on knowledge in higher education may well contribute to a lack of integration between knowing, and doing and being; the illumination of the enmeshed nature of the cognitive and the affective, another distinctive feature of threshold concept theory (Cousin, 2016), lends itself to a more informed consideration of praxis development. The transformations associated with threshold concepts extend beyond a specific way of understanding to more profound shifts in language usage, subjectivity and even identity (Meyer & Land, 2003) – ways of doing and being. The related experiences of liminality can be uncomfortable and Cousin (2008) argues that because learner anxiety is unavoidable in the process of coming to grasp threshold concepts, we should endeavour to generate *supportive liminal environments* rather than the more traditional notions of safe learning that emphasize student comfort. The former would convey a sense of normality around uncertainty and discomfort as part of learning, would see “learning [as] a form of identity work,” and would incorporate a “deep appreciation of the dialectic between knowing and being” (Cousin, 2008, p. 264). Land (2016) points out that this kind of language is discordant with the dominant global discourse of a marketized education system that locates students as consumers:

In public and marketing documentation this discourse becomes interwoven with narratives of excellence, images of graduate success and student happiness, a sense of student entitlement and the friendliness and helpfulness of (providing) staff. In its strongest rendition this representation can depict learning within the organisation as an undertaking that is non-problematic, without any significant incurring of risk (p. 12).

The language of threshold concept theory, then, can contribute to a counter-discourse in addressing the current vulnerability, highlighted by Cartney (2015, p. 1143), of pedagogic research “being

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mobilised as part of a corporatist enterprise – focusing on the ‘student experience’ and the dissemination of decontextualized ‘good practice’ at institutional level.” Returning to White et al.’s (2017) argument for the need to implicate ourselves in the wider realities of, in this case, neoliberal global capitalism, this imperative is clearly not limited to practitioners in the field. Related parallels in academia are evident and will be further discussed below.

Threshold concept theory is not without criticism. Some have questioned whether threshold concepts is a theory, concept, framework or model (Tight, 2014; Walker, 2013). They have identified a lack of precision around the definition of threshold concepts (Rowbottom, 2007; Tight, 2014; Walker, 2013), and challenged whether it is even possible for concepts to be empirically determined as threshold (Rowbottom, 2007). Baillie, Bowden, and Meyer (2013) argue, however, that the lack of fixed, precisely defined criteria is deliberate, in that such criteria would be inelastic in their ability to hold the inter-individual differences around the degree to which threshold concepts’ key characteristics are experienced by students. Tight (2014) also concedes that, despite the unhelpfulness of an imprecise definition, the evidence indicates threshold concepts’ utility in theorizing and responding to particular issues in teaching and learning in higher education. The development of praxis, this paper argues, is one such issue.

The use of “concept” in threshold concepts has also been identified as problematic. The word itself means different things across and within disciplines (Anderson & Johnston, 2017), and can signal a “content-focused view of knowledge” (Baillie et al., 2013, p. 235) which would be contrary to what is being espoused here. Shinnars-Kennedy (2008) warns of the common pitfall of gravitating towards “big” or advanced concepts in considering what is threshold and highlights the emerging pattern of everyday concepts [and perhaps everyday ways of thinking and practicing not normally considered as “concepts”] being identified as threshold across the disciplines. Irvine and Carmichael (2009) propose reframing a threshold concept as a “point of focus” for reflection and development of learner identity. Meyer, Land, and Baillie (2010, p. x) expand their use of related language to include “threshold practices ... threshold experiences”, and “learning thresholds ... which might not be strictly conceptual, but are more concerned with shifts in identity and subjectivity, with procedural knowledge, or the ways of thinking and practicing customary to a given disciplinary or professional community” (p.xi). It is in this more complex and encompassing way that the term “threshold concepts” is being considered and applied here.

2. The Study

2.1 Epistemological basis

This is the first known study of threshold concepts in residential child care, child and youth care or social work. Its overarching aim was to identify and explore potential threshold concepts in residential child care, with a corollary question about the utility of threshold concept theory in considering student and practitioner learning. Threshold concept theory has yet to develop an established research methodology (Quinlan et al., 2013), with limited consensus around how to identify threshold concepts. Because they are epistemologically informed, Cousin (2008, p. 263) argues, their theorization has and should be considered “provisional, contestable and culturally situated.” Likewise, Lucas and Mladenovic (2007, p. 239) take a similarly social constructivist view, arguing that differences around whether certain concepts are threshold and particularly *why* they might be are “endemic and unavoidable.” This two-part paper seeks to start a conversation that embraces these related uncertainties and complexities.

Researchers’ epistemological position and subject expertise influence the way threshold concepts are understood, and therefore how related research is designed and carried out (Quinlan et al., 2013). For these reasons, Quinlan et al. (2013) argue for methodological discussions in threshold concept theory research to incorporate explicit, related content. Towards this end: I am what would be considered a ‘subject expert’ (as opposed to an educational researcher), as I have taught, researched and published on residential child care for several years in higher education; before that, I worked for several years in residential child care in direct practice, management and training; and my interest in threshold concept theory is grounded in its fit with my own professional orientation towards transformation, especially those parallels between transformations of healing and development that I witnessed in residential child care and the epistemological and ontological transformations – “non-negotiable” features of a threshold concept according to Meyer (cited in Quinlan et al., 2013, p. 586) – that occur in education as a result of fully grasping a threshold concept.

By incorporating the views and experiences of students and practitioners, I hope, at the very least, to broaden the processes of social construction of threshold concepts in our field. This approach also

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parallels the fundamental practice, espoused in my teaching, of taking seriously the views of children in all matters that affect them (United Nations, 1989). Fundamentally, I hope that by starting a dialogue about threshold concepts that involves subject educators, practitioners and students (and perhaps educational experts in future), these various forms of experience and expertise will support the development of more effective curricula, thus improving the care experiences of children and young people.

2.2 Design decisions

The study comprised two stages: stage one involved a series of focus groups with educators (n=15) and practitioners (n=14) to explore their views about possible threshold concepts in the field; stage two involved in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of practitioners from the focus groups (n=7) to explore their experiences of relational practice, the threshold concept identified most prominently identified in the focus groups. Part 1 of this two-part paper focuses on stage one of the study; part 2 focuses in on relational practice as threshold, drawing primarily on the data from the in-depth interviews but also incorporating content from focus groups.

The study was funded by the Higher Education Academy with match funding from the University of XXX. The study was deemed low-risk in terms of potential harm to participants and was approved by the XXX's ethics committee. The difference in status and power between the two participant groups informed the design decision to carry out separate (rather than mixed) focus groups (Litosseliti, 2003). Its design was also informed by Barradell's (2013) argument for the involvement of participants beyond the educational domain in order to increase rigour in the processes of threshold concept identification; thus, practitioners (as well as educators) were included. This also served to incorporate voices of those who generally have less influence (but are perhaps more affected) by trends in what is deemed suitable content for training and education in residential child care. The study sought the views of key informants (Payne & Payne, 2004) in teaching, learning and practicing residential child care. Inclusion criteria for educators therefore included teaching on a degree-level course specifically dedicated to residential child care, therapeutic child care or child and youth care, and also having published research and/or theorization of practice (thus contributing to a body of literature that informs curricular content). Inclusion criteria for practitioners included having undertaken a dedicated degree-level course in residential child care, therapeutic child care or child

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and youth care, and also having practiced in one or more residential child care settings. Some of the practitioner participants had many years of practice experience before undertaking their courses, while others earned their qualification prior to entering the field and were relatively new to practice. A purposive and snowball sampling method (Flick, 2007) involved inviting educators and practitioners via e-mail and international conference attendance, and requesting that they further disseminate the invites to others in their networks.

2.3 Data Collection

Focus groups were carried out in an online platform via individual audio-video cameras. All participants were given a short briefing sheet on threshold concept theory in advance of the focus group, and each focus group commenced with a brief review of this material. Three focus groups averaging 105 minutes in length were carried out with educator participants (n=15); scheduling challenges necessitated five focus groups with practitioner participants (n=14) and these averaged 107 minutes in length. All participants had studied, practiced and/or taught in the United Kingdom (UK), Canada or the US, though at the time of data collection, one was residing in New Zealand and one in Malta.

Table 1: Participants' location at time of data collection (all participants had studied, practiced and/or taught in the UK or North America)

	North America	UK	NZ	Malta
Educators	7	7	1	
Practitioner	6	7		1

2.4 Data Analysis

All focus groups were recorded and analyzed through repeated viewings, partial transcription and a process of manual coding, comparison of themes and relationships across data sets, and distillation into a smaller set of generalisations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first stage of analysis only involved focus group data and was based on what DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCullough (2011, pp. 137-138) describe as structural codes, or codes that "grow from a specific project's research

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goals and questions.” The focus groups sought to establish whether participants identified threshold concepts as recognisable and relevant to their experiences of teaching, writing and/or learning about practice in residential child care (or child and youth care more broadly) and if so, to explore what might be threshold concepts for the field. Focus group data were therefore coded accordingly. The modelling function in NVivo© was employed to organize and visualize proposed threshold concepts. The focus groups were also analysed in relation to participants’ views of the utility of threshold concept theory. The second stage of analysis focused on relational practice, involved focus group and individual interview data, and will be discussed in more depth in part 2.

3. Findings

All participants across all of the focus groups affirmed the definition and five characteristics of threshold concepts as relevant to their experiences of teaching, writing and/or learning about practice in residential child care. Potential threshold concepts were then discussed in every focus group.

3.1 Potential Threshold Concepts from Focus Groups with Educators

The purpose of the diagrams (in this and the next subsection) is to offer some intelligibility to what might otherwise be an interesting but chaotic swirl of ideas and experiences. At the same time, they should not be interpreted as either precise or definitive, as is in keeping with the exploratory design and methodological underpinnings discussed above. All of the threshold concepts suggested in the focus groups are included in the diagrams in order to provide an at-a-glance gestalt of what was cumulatively discussed.

The purpose of the diagrams is not to contend that every concept discussed in the focus groups is indeed threshold; rather, the diagrams collate and report on what was identified as potentially threshold. Their value is in supporting ongoing discussions in the field and in providing information for future, related studies.

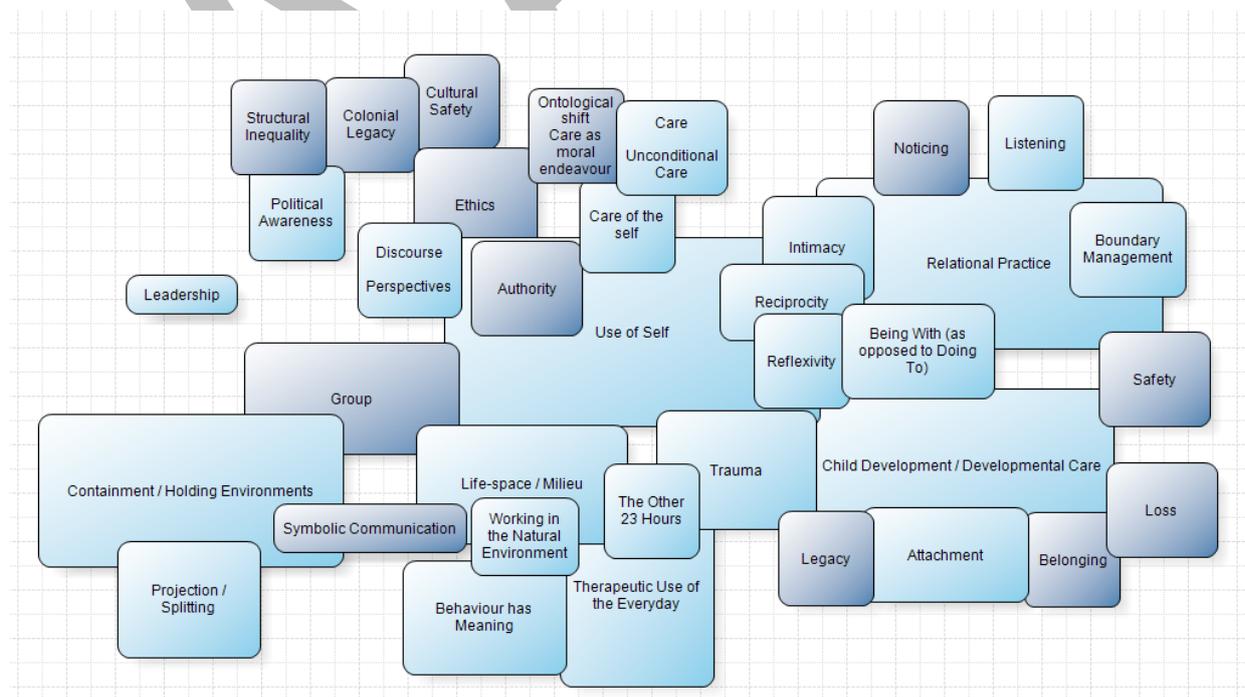
The use of similar terms were combined when respondents were discussing what were essentially the same nominated threshold concept (e.g., relational practice, discussions about the importance of relationship, discussions around the *doing* of relationship in practice were all organised under *relational practice*), or were potentially component parts of a threshold concept (e.g., self-reflection,

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self-awareness, reflexivity and *use of self* were all combined under the latter phrase). Those concepts or areas of learning and practice that were discussed with greater prominence (i.e., frequency, depth and emphasis within discussions) are represented by larger squares, offering an approximate sense of the relative attention the proposed concepts received. Depth was determined by a combination of duration of discussion on a given potential threshold concept, as well as the content of those discussions, including: deeper delving into the conceptual material related to the said concept; aspects that were consistent with one or more of the characteristics of threshold; and the use of illustrative examples (usually to illustrate one or more characteristics of threshold). Emphasis tended to involve more animation and energy in the discussion.

The interrelationships between potential threshold concepts are reflected by their proximity, though due to the integrative and iterative nature of the discussions, this could have been validly organised a number of different ways. For example, discussions of attachment could have simply been subsumed within child development, but across both participant groups, it was linked not only to developmental theory but also to relationships and to behaviour as having meaning; it was therefore represented in its own rectangle, but still positioned overlapping child development.

Diagram 1: Potential Threshold Concepts Discussed across the educator focus groups; those also discussed by practitioners in subsequent focus groups are a lighter blue, and those only discussed by educators are a darker blue.



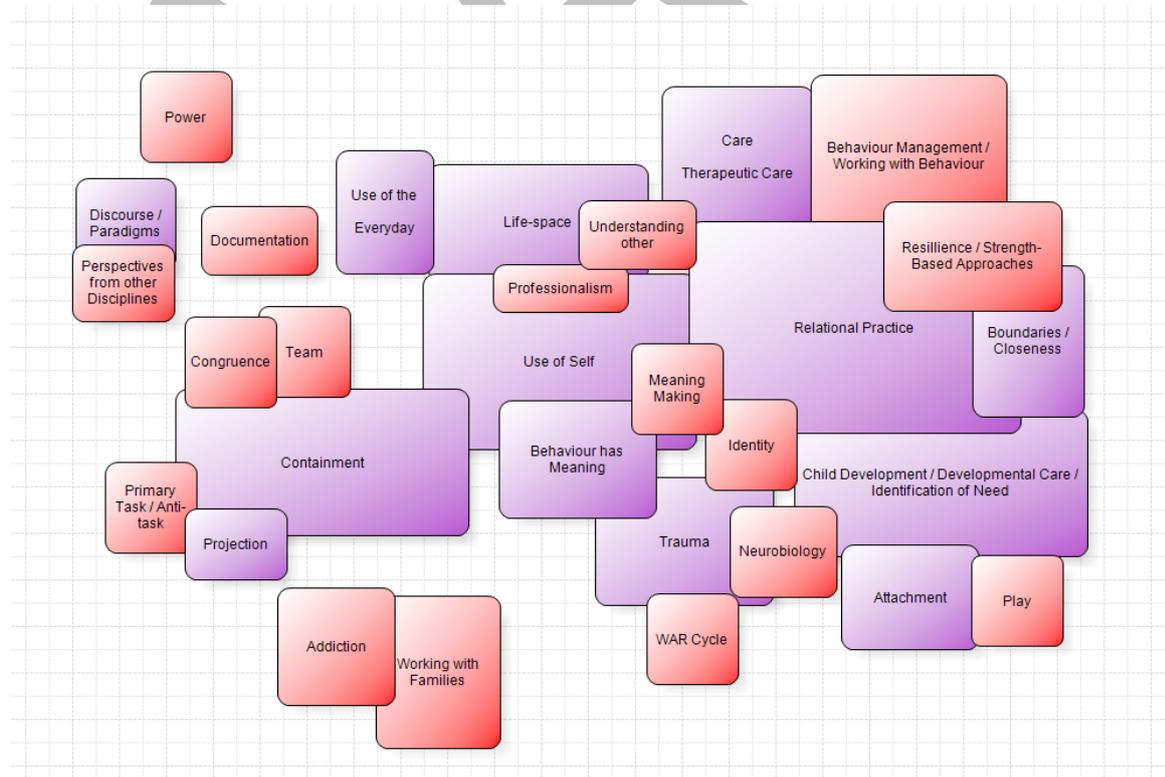
Use of Self was the most prominent threshold concept in terms of frequency, depth and emphasis in discussions across the educator focus groups; it also came up frequently when participants were discussing other potential threshold concepts, and was discussed by all three focus groups.

Relational practice was almost as prominent, both directly and in relation to the discussion of other potential threshold concepts or areas.

3.2 Potential Threshold Concepts from Focus Groups with Practitioners

Practitioners appeared less confident in suggesting potential threshold concepts and required more prompts to elicit responses (e.g., questions around transformative and troublesome aspects of their learning journey); once they alighted on a potential threshold concept, however, their discussions became more animated and articulate. Diagram 2 represents the potential threshold concepts discussed across the five focus groups, with the same grouping decisions (i.e., related to *attachment*, *use of self* and *relational practice*) as discussed above.

Diagram : Potential Threshold Concepts Discussed across the practitioner focus groups; those also discussed by educators in previous focus groups are purple, and those only discussed by practitioners are red.



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Relational practice was the most prominent potential threshold in terms of frequency, depth and emphasis in discussions across the practitioner focus groups; it was discussed by all the groups.

Across all of the focus groups – educator and practitioner—all five characteristics of threshold concepts were implicitly or explicitly identified. Discussions regularly and often quickly shifted focus before any single threshold concept was interrogated in relation to all five characteristics, which was consistent with the aim of this first stage of data collection; the second stage, discussed in more detail in part 2, offers a more in-depth interrogation of *relational practice* in relation to the five characteristics. These characteristics also were present in participants' discussions of threshold concept theory more generally – discussions which provided a particularly rich seam of data.

3.3 Threshold Concept Theory and its Utility for Residential Child Care

As might be expected, educators spent considerably more time discussing threshold concept theory generally (as opposed to specific, potential threshold concepts), as compared with practitioners. The remaining findings, therefore, are drawn somewhat more from the educator focus groups. A balance will be re-established in part 2, where practitioners' views and experiences of *relational practice* as threshold are explored in depth and therefore predominate.

In all three focus groups, educators expressed enthusiasm about its utility for considering education and practice in residential child care, with descriptions that included threshold concept theory as “intriguing,” “important,” “exciting,” and even “emancipatory.” Some educators echoed the concerns about the term “concept” articulated by Anderson and Johnston (2017) and Baillie et al. (2013), with one participant encouraging that this be reflected in the findings:

So as a learning object, I'd prefer to have them reflect the messiness rather than things that are clean and dry and neat. (Educator)

Indeed, the terms ‘messy’ or ‘messiness’ were repeatedly used across all three focus groups.

3.3.1 Threshold Concept Theory and the Selves of Learners

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The varying degree to which all five characteristics tended to be present in a learner's process of coming to grasp a threshold concept was linked, in one extended discussion, to the self of that learner:

Our individual experience of a threshold concept might not give equal weight to all five [...] the characteristics are all things I recognise but whether they have to be present with equal strength [is a question for me] [...] it's about [...] who you are coming to the concept. So what you bring to that as an individual practitioner is going to have an influence on the significance or weight of these five characteristics. So what's troublesome or counterintuitive to one person might be less so for another, and that's interesting in itself. (Educator)

Consideration of learners' selves, often contrasted against abstract knowledge and skills that must be acquired, was discussed multiple times in each educator focus group, particularly in content that was analysed in relation to participants' views of the utility of threshold concept theory.

What you're really talking about is internalization. It's not about what's out there; it's about what's inside the person [...] it has to do with experience, and these are concepts that only have meaning if they are embodied [...] it's not about learning these things, it's about embodying them. (Educator)

In a different focus group, another participant highlighted the demands involved in internalising potential threshold concepts:

In lots of other jobs or areas of learning, you're having to learn about and are expected to learn an external thing. But in child and youth care, it's so relational, we're asking students to do two things: to apply these kind of big ideas to deepen their understanding of the children they're working with, but also apply it to themselves, to think about what it means for themselves. (Educator)

Like the educators, some practitioner participants conveyed a perception that expectations or demands of the self are different than in other disciplines:

I think that idea of looking at self is really intentionally asked of you to do, which isn't done in most, in quite a few other courses. And so I think it hugely impacts your learning process

and how you come at the rest of your programme, um, and into the field, I guess if you reach the threshold. (Practitioner)

In all three cases, the participants quoted above spoke not only about some kind of change or transformation in the selves of learners, but went on to identify troublesome aspects of the process. Across the focus groups, practitioners' identification of difficulties related to the focus on their selves in their courses and in the field included: discomfort with talking about oneself; dealing with one's own past and the impact of that on learning and practice; a lack of wider social support for thinking and talking in a self-reflective way; the challenge of being honest about whether decisions are child- or adult-centred; and detrimental impacts of too much self-reflection. Resonating with this last difficulty, in one educator focus group, a repeated thread emerged around too much focus on selves of the students:

I'm very concerned at what I hear so often in our discourse, that in making our selves central to our processing, to our understanding and to our work means that at some critical level, the other is always in some danger of disappearing [...] it's problematic and we need to be struggling with it better than we are. (Educator)

For practitioners who spoke about too much focus on the self, the detriment was eroded confidence and fear. For the educators, it related to self-absorption and a tendency to rely solely on feelings to determine ethical action (referred to as "if it feels right it, it is right" by one educator).

"Great honesty" was identified as a quality students need in order to get through thresholds in their learning and was linked to changes to the self. One participant characterised it as:

Undoing the habits and beliefs of one's own age in oneself, so as not to replicate the rather dubious patterns that we're trying to assist people in getting free of. (Educator)

An educator in a different focus group spoke in a similar manner about students' "common sense" knowledge about children and families, and that helping them reject this knowledge when it is inaccurate and unhelpful can be both transformative and troublesome. Land et al. (2014) highlight that unlearning misconceptions is sometimes a necessary but troublesome part of the process of acquiring new ideas. A subtler form of misconception is the seemingly simple nature of some potential threshold concepts, as discussed by the following educator in yet a different focus group:

What's troublesome about these threshold concepts [those encapsulated in everyday language] is *not* that they are initially counterintuitive, [but] that they are deceptively

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accessible to people and that the profundity of it is very difficult to get across [...] it takes time. (Educator)

In a practitioner focus group, a participant echoed this insight stating, “you kind of think that you know what it means, but then you think, ‘what does it really mean?’”

Other forms of unlearning were also identified by practitioners. The following reflects something important about the experiences and related learning from schooling that students can bring to higher education:

It was like, ‘woah, I don’t do ology. That’s an ology thing’. But actually once I got my head around it, it made sense and it kind of helped me understand. (Practitioner)

This practitioner spoke of the transformative impact of her acquired knowledge on her attitude and practice, but also having the troubling sense that colleagues “were like, ‘Oh my god here she goes again’.” Implicit in the next practitioner’s response is learning that takes place in the field:

Not just that we have to get away from our intuitive responses but that sometimes there are things that we have learned that we might need to unlearn, and that might be difficult because it involves a change of identity. So I may learn how to be a professional in a certain way, and then I kind of carry that about as my way of being a professional, but I may need to unlearn that if I want to work in a relational way. (Practitioner)

In both cases, the unlearning related to the sense of self of the practitioner and therefore required a shift in identity – implicit in the first and explicit in the second.

4. Discussion

The diagrams presented at the beginning of the findings reflect a greater degree of commonality between the two participant groups than divergence, with considerable overlap around those potential threshold concepts that received more attention – *relational practice, use of self, developmental care, containment, and life-space*. Despite the sample size, this is compelling given the different geographical (North America and the UK) and subject (Residential Social Work, Child and Youth Care, Therapeutic Child Care) locations of participants. These candidate threshold concepts offer a starting comparator for further research, and the stronger candidates provide direction for deeper interrogation, with *relational practice* the focus of such interrogation in part 2 of this paper.

Some divergences between educator and practitioner focus groups also warrant consideration. Educators clearly suggested more potential threshold concepts than their practitioner counterparts. This may well reflect the tendency, as discussed above, for practitioners to compartmentalize theory and practice into separate silos. At the same time, educators very likely spend more time thinking conceptually about practice.

More significantly, perhaps, were practitioners' considerable discussions about the troublesome process of learning how to respond to children and young people's behaviour. While this was often spoken about in a way that integrated content around *relational practice* or notions of "therapeutic," it was also identified distinctively as its own potential threshold area of learning and practice. It stands out, then, that *working with behaviour* or *challenging behaviour* was not touched on in any of the educator focus groups. This is not to say that thinking about and responding differently to children and young people's behaviour was not implicitly present in educator discussions, including discussions about *trauma, belonging, being with, noticing, authority* and *unconditional care*, but it was never named and was a somewhat distant backdrop to these discussions. This is interesting in that challenging behaviour is often the most difficult part of residential child care work (Emond, Steckley, & Roesch-Marsh, 2016), with "pain-based behaviour" a central concept in a seminal, grounded-theory study designed to theorize well-functioning residential child care (Anglin, 2002). Meyer and Land (2003, p. 5) describe the "difficulty experienced by expert practitioners looking back across thresholds they have personally long since crossed," and one way of understanding the disparity between educators and practitioners might be attributed to *experiential proximity*.

According to Cousin (2006), students' experiential proximity, or how near their experience is, to a threshold concept will strongly influence how troublesome they find that concept. Experiential proximity comprises experiences related to family and school cultures, social positioning, and ethical and political orientations – experiences on which students can draw when encountering a threshold concept. The student/practitioner who described her initial reaction of "woah, I don't do ology," for example, reflects some sort of experiential distance from academic learning that may be related to family culture and/or social positioning. It can be argued that, likewise, educators' experiential proximity will influence how troublesome it is to teach it well, and that the passage of time between threshold experiences and present teaching may also influence it. *Working with behaviour* may be one such example. The notion of experiential proximity offers some tangibility in addressing what students *and* educators bring to the learning encounter, particularly when gaps in experience are at

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the root of what is troublesome. Experiential opportunities with support for related reflection are more likely to assist students and educators to develop or maintain experiential proximity than just didactic or skills-based approaches. Bellefeuille, Berikoff, McGrath, and Thompson (2012) argue for the use of creative technologies and expressive arts as a powerful means of bridging cultural differences and expanding teaching and assessment approaches that traditionally focus only on the cognitive and verbal dimensions of learning. This has resonance with Phelan's (2001) argument that positive transformations in direct practice come about not simply from what is told to children and young people, but from the considered provision of activities that facilitate new experiences of the self. A similar framing, informed by the application of threshold concept theory, may better support students' transformations into competent practitioners, especially when they lack experiential proximity to parts of the curriculum.

The seemingly simple nature of what is actually complex and challenging in residential child care practice, as highlighted by participants, is not solely troublesome for students and practitioners who have yet to traverse a threshold. Notions of *life-space* or how *relational practice* and *use of self* should manifest in residential care as opposed to fieldwork or other appointment-based work, for example, can be troublesome for other professionals, often at an unconscious and unexplored level. Tacit assumptions can be made based on misunderstanding or a form of disciplinary imperialism that keeps residential child care the "poor relation" of social work (Smith, 2009), and these dynamics can also make it troublesome for practitioners to fully grasp related threshold concepts. This may have been bound up in the student/practitioner's comment about needing to "unlearn [...] how to be professional in a certain way [...] if I want to work in a relational way." There is a growing dissonance between much of social work theory and the realities of residential child care (Smith, 2005, 2017) and trivialising language ascribed to what are actually extraordinarily complex processes (Gharabaghi, 2010). Thus, this seemingly simple (yet highly troublesome) characteristic of some nominated thresholds offers illumination about their bounded nature, as well as how the field might direct its efforts to better articulate (and support students to better articulate) what largely remains tacit.

5. Conclusion

The application of threshold concept theory brings clarity and direction to the compelling need for curriculum development that supports students' dynamic integration of knowing, doing and being; it

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does so by bringing into sharp relief the identity work necessary for the development of praxis in residential child care and the sometimes invisible components that are needed to support it, including the relationship between educators' and students' development of praxis. The potential threshold of challenging behaviour (in addition to being an interesting divergence between sample groups) offers an excellent illustration and draws together several strands of the discussion. Students' and newly-qualified practitioners' sensory overload and abandonment of theory (Phelan, 2000) is immediately recognisable when one considers the experience of being faced with, for example, a frightening young person in an escalating state of distress and aggression. In order to hold onto relevant knowledge and consistently respond helpfully, a dynamically integrated praxis that incorporates multiple ways of knowing, doing and being, in the moment and under pressure, is required. Some or even many students will have limited or otherwise troublesome experiential proximity to escalating situations, the psycho-emotional pain that underlies them, and/or features of the wider socio-political context that contribute to them. Educators' sometimes lack of experiential proximity due to temporal distance from practice is also a relevant consideration in how this significant, potential threshold area of practice should be considered, educationally. The provision of experiential opportunities and supportive liminal environments to address such proximity issues is tricky even under optimal conditions, let alone in the current climate wrought by a marketized education system that positions students as consumers and education as a commodity. The naturally occurring opportunities presented by students' (and educators') reactions to a "threshold concept in the vicinity" (Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007, p. 243), however, offer potentially powerful learning experiences to serve the development of a praxis that is aligned with the realities of residential child care. Supportive liminal environments are necessary for this to be possible. Who and how educators are with students, then, is as relevant to their development of praxis as the skills and knowledge they are exposed to.

That the self of the learner was a central consideration of educators' discussions of threshold concept theory more generally highlights a pedagogical fit between it and current theorizations of praxis in the field. Threshold concepts are transformative not only in terms of concepts, ideas, skills and practices (i.e., knowing and doing), but also lead to transformations in identity and worldview (Land et al., 2005) (i.e., being). Such experiences can be frightening and/or evoke a sense of loss (Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007). When the self is the primary medium of intervention, which is the case in residential child care, the intensity of fear and loss can be compounded as the self becomes the subject of one's learning (Ruch, 2000). Related experiences of loss can often generate denial and other defensive responses, with concomitant emotions of fear, anger and resentment (Lucas &

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Mladenovic, 2007). Their behavioural expressions are traditionally ignored or framed as problems to be addressed, foreclosing opportunities for addressing the doing and being components of praxis, but Lucas and Mladenovic (2007, p. 243) argue that these behaviours can indicate “a threshold concept in the vicinity” and instead encourage curiosity and dialogue. Similarly, curiosity and dialogue are strongly espoused in child and youth care practice as well (White, 2007), and this highlights an important parallel between what may be necessary to support students through thresholds and what we espouse should happen in the field.

Meyer et al. (2010) discuss the implicit, underlying “rules” and “game” in any given field and how threshold concepts can inform curriculum development towards articulating and therefore making accessible to the learner what is usually tacit. This can improve students’ ability to traverse related thresholds. It is argued here that such consideration extends related benefits beyond individual learners to the field; tacit assumptions of fellow professionals are far more likely to be identified and challenged by practitioners who have been supported by a curriculum that not only reveals these underlying rules, but distinguishes them from how the “game” is played, or practice understood, in cognate fields.

Part 1 of this two-part paper has established the relevance and utility of threshold concept theory to address the imperative of improving the efficacy of workforce development through more effectively supporting the development of praxis, both students’ and educators’, in order to improve the experiences and life chances of children in residential child care. In addition, the concept of praxis offers a useful counterpoint in conceptualising how various strands of threshold concept theory cohere around the use of self in practice, particularly in fields or disciplines where the self is more central to the work and must perform under pressure. Part 2 focuses in on *relational practice*, the most prominently discussed threshold concept, to identify it as indeed threshold, and more importantly, to argue the utility of such identification.

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