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Service user and carer involvement in social work education – where are we now? – Part 1

This journal was proud to produce the first special edition on service user involvement in 2006 (Vol25 No.4) with 11 pioneering articles from the UK. One of those authors contributing to the first special edition, June Sadd, is also one of the guest editors of this special edition.

Over the years, the journal has continued to publish creative and challenging articles on service user involvement in social work education, reflecting a commitment to promoting further understanding in this important and developing area of knowledge. Importantly also, the journal has retained two places on its main board for service users and carers who play a key role in its development. This special edition and its call for papers, have been developed jointly by a team of service users and academics who between them, have widely published and practiced in the area of service user and carer involvement in Britain and Northern Ireland. The editorial team, therefore, worked closely together on all aspects of production for this special edition.

As it is now the 10th anniversary of this first ground-breaking edition, the current special edition editors wondered, ‘what has happened since 2006?’ This is what this two part special edition seeks to answer. The first thing that stands out is that the involvement of service users in social work education is now much more established, not only in the UK where it is mandated by key relevant regulatory bodies as a requirement for programme registration, but internationally as well. In other countries, we see examples of how ‘involvement’ has become increasingly embedded within education, even though it is not a curriculum requirement as it is across the four nations of the UK. However, that does not mean that it is any worse or better or more inclusive. You, the reader can decide on that, as you read the contributions of the special edition Parts 1 and 2.

Back in 2006, all the contributors to the special edition were based in the UK. For this special edition, we originally had 45 abstracts submitted representing 13 different countries, hence our reasoning behind creating and devoting a double special issue to this important topic. Interestingly, none of these submissions came from North America, even though our North American colleagues regularly contribute to the journal. We do not know whether this is because we use different terminologies for the same things or if there is something more structurally inbuilt in North American social work education that has decided that service users/clients should not, or cannot, be involved as key partners in the process. This is something we will try and find out more about.

In this, the first part of a two part special edition, we have contributions from five countries: Australia, England, Israel, Italy and Scotland. We have had contributions from those self identifying as service users, service users and academics, and by academics who are also service users (Fox). This provides the reader with a rich diversity and multiplicity of challenging intersections and perspectives. As this special edition highlights, these identifiers are fluid and are not fixed for life, but can and do change. Today’s academic may be tomorrow’s service user and vice versa, whilst not forgetting it is also possible to be both at the same time. This special edition sees both perspectives as essential for the continuing development of effective social work education and practice. For example, Fox identifies her hybrid identity, both as a social work academic and

as a service user, as a strength allowing her to draw on different types of knowledge including experiential, practice and academic knowledge. In particular, she focuses on the place of experiential wisdom and how it can be shared in social work education.

However, it is also acknowledged that the service user perspective has often been silenced, othered or trivialised with the nature of its tacit knowledge deemed to be inferior to academic knowledge. This special edition seeks to challenge this view and argues that a healthy social work needs both practitioners and academics to be in a continuous dialogue with service users and carers learning with and from each other. In this way, we can ensure that the next generation of social work students will be fit for purpose and that we would be happy for them to be visiting us, or our families, in our time of need.

Part 1 of the special edition involves a wide range of service user groups including articles focusing on service users who are older people (Gutman and Ramon) those with a mental health diagnosis (Dorozenko, Ridley, Martin and Mayhoub, women in prison (Raikes and Balen) and those with learning difficulties (Ward, Raphael(C), Clark and Raphael(V)). The other articles contain the experiences of a range of service users and carers. Gutman and Ramon undertook a comparative research study to evaluate the involvement of older service users in social work education in Israel and England. One of the interesting findings from this study was that that the Israeli students valued the involvement of service users more so than those in England. It is suggested that this is because service user involvement is a new development. Dorozenko et al. describe a project in Australia which went beyond the norm of guest lecturing for people with experience of mental health services. In particular, they highlight the processes and findings from their Valuing Lived Experience Project.

Ward et al. argue that people with learning disabilities have traditionally been excluded for involvement in social work programmes. They then describe how their university worked with a man with profound and multiple learning disabilities who was commissioned to design and deliver specialist teaching to qualifying social workers. From this experience, they argue that it is our lack of imagination and our assumptions and attitudes about people's capabilities that are the real barriers to inclusion. Cabiati and Raineri, from an Italian perspective, also discuss how stigmatizing attitudes form barriers to working with service users and carers. In seeking to reduce these barriers, they describe the results from their project of exposing students to service users and carers and measuring the student's attitudes pre and post involvement on an attitudes scale and through the use of a qualitative interview. The results suggested that social work students showed reduced stigmatizing attitudes after this contact.

Raikes and Balen also recount their experiences of working with another often excluded group, imprisoned mothers. They discuss the development and findings of an inter-professional workshop between social work, police and nursing students in the UK. As a result of the workshop, the students reported an increased understanding of the challenges facing children whilst their mother was in prison and the need for inter-disciplinary work to provide an effective service to these mothers.

This leads onto Sen, McLelland and Jowett's article on the running of four 'living libraries' in which the 'living books' of the lived experiences of carers and service users are used to promote a dialogue between carers, service users, students, practitioners and social work educators. They also discuss how the living libraries were established, the ground rules for their use and their potential to impact upon social work education.

The other articles contain a range of service user groups whilst Levy describes the results of a three-year experiential study in Scotland involving student social workers spending 15 hours with a service user and/or carers. During this time, the students are expected to discuss two policy practice questions, whereby the placement becomes both a site of knowledge creation and knowledge application in practice. One reinforcing and challenging the other.

Rooney, Unwin and Osborne report on a service user and carer led research project into the professional training of social workers and the influence of service users and carers. This qualitative research found that there were significant benefits for service users and carers, not only in terms of increased self-development, but also in increased confidence in managing their own care needs. This suggests that the benefits of such involvement are more far reaching than previously thought whilst such involvement may also challenge the increasingly marketized higher education culture.

As you can see, the range of articles on service user and carer involvement in social work education in this Part 1 edition, not only describe the processes of this involvement, but also seek to evaluate if it has been effective or not. The evaluations though, tend to be module/workshop specific and, except for Levy, which covers a 3 year period, tend not to be longitudinal. There is also a bias within these articles of being primarily qualitative. When we come to write about the articles in the special edition Part 2, these are themes we will return to and discuss further.

We feel we have now answered an important part of our question for this special edition. Service user and carer involvement continues to grow and has blossomed in many ways into an established way of working in many social work education settings across the world. The popularity of the special edition, evidenced by the number of submissions we received, is testament to the fact that there is a wealth of interesting work going on which we take immense encouragement from. The next special edition will feature additional aspects of this important topic. For now, we hope you enjoy reading and learning from the work included in this first part of our two special editions.

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