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Service user and carer involvement in social work education—where are we now?—part 2

This second of our special editions features papers which are linked by the following themes: international examples of service user involvement, the nature of service user knowledge, service user involvement in research and an analysis of the impact of involvement on subsequent social work practice.

The first paper by Ole Petter Askheim, Peter Beresford & Cecilia Heule provides an important focus on ways of addressing the gaps between service users and professionals that can characterise and shape social work practice. By using examples from social work practice and education in both Scandinavia and the UK, these authors argue that their experiences of meaningful partnership working in social work education can shine an important light on analysing both the opportunities and challenges that need to be considered.

The second paper by Merav Moshe Grodofsky & Carolyn Gutman brings service users and social work students together in an international context to examine perceptions of human rights. Again, a similar theme emerges about partnership working and the ingredients necessary for this to work between professional staff as providers and service users on the receiving end. The common experiences of exclusion and marginalisation shared by students and service users about human rights issues highlight the fact that the experience of *othering* is not something solely experienced by service users.

The third paper by Kieron Hatton interrogates the nature of service user knowledge and provides a necessary critical analysis. The author contextualises this debate on knowledge within a partnership approach to social work curriculum design involving service users. The paper mirrors the social work practice requirements around social justice and social change by examining how these key aspects are also entwined within the fabric of meaningfully collaborating with service users in the educational setting.

The fourth paper by Petra Videmšek reports on the findings of a project where social work students and service users collaborated together to research the views of mental health service users living in group care settings. This paper raises questions and issues around the contribution to research of service users whose skills and insights are based on their own lived experience. In this way, again we see the theme of knowledge being interrogated and where service user knowledge can be positioned within the overall continuum of what counts as *knowing*.

The fifth paper by Hilda Loughran & Gary Broderick again positions service users in an important and elevated position as examiners in the assessment of a Masters level social work programme. Again, what we see is that the social work educational context can be a potentially transformative site for influencing and shaping the types of inclusive social work practice that service users want from social workers when they qualify. So therefore, whilst such partnership working is important in the learning and educational context, this will amount to little if social workers when they qualify don't follow through on these important messages about involvement in their day-to-day work with service users and carers.

The final paper in this collection by Mel Hughes links to this latter point in its focus on evaluating the impact of service user and carer educational involvement on social work students'

practice when they qualify. This is becoming an emerging area of research given that service user and carer involvement has now been part of UK social work education for about fifteen years but there are to date too few studies focusing on impact. Interestingly, this paper highlights the individualistic nature of how service user involvement impacts on students when they are in practice and are reflecting back on their learning. This paper therefore points educators towards reflections on how service user and carer involvement can be developed in ways which will further augment the learning experience for students, thinking ahead to when they qualify.

Ideas in Action includes a first for the journal with an article on the issues involved in participatory film-making between experts by experience, social workers and therapists by Yohai Hakak and Kevin Holmes. This is in keeping with the special edition and identifies an alternative way in which service users can contribute to the development of social work education.

We also include a book review by a German foster carer Andrea Kuhn and the foster child's sister Madeline Kuhn reviewing, from their perspective, reviewing the messages for foster carers and social workers working with a traumatised foster child. We would welcome further book reviews by service users and carers.

Reflecting on the question we posed for these two special editions, we feel we can express confidence that progress has been considerable in regard to the expanding way in which service user and carer involvement have taken hold within social work education. In particular, we want to highlight how what was a peculiarly UK initiative is now an international one. We in the UK now have as much to learn from our international colleagues as they do from us. It is however interesting to note that whilst we had abstracts from 13 different countries there were none from the US or Canada. It should also be noted that this way of working is not without its challenges as various authors have identified in special editions part 1 and 2, it often brings challenges from colleagues, service users and carers, academics and students. It is not to be entered into lightly, but we would argue that the benefits can outweigh the costs. It is also a form of education that requires academics to accept that they do not have all the answers and that co-production in learning is a positive development. There is a need to be open to sharing power and learning from others whether they be service users, carers or students.

It was good to see that we can now demonstrate a wider range of involvement building on service user and carer testimonies. We can now point to a host of examples to show creative and imaginative ways in which this important knowledge has been incorporated to assist students in their learning and development of practice insights. Increasingly, what we now see from these examples is how the educational setting has become a very important learning arena for students to understand how their social work practice needs to respond in meeting the needs of service users and carers when they qualify. This arena is also important for service users and carers representing a site for affirming self-esteem and promoting social justice.

It is also welcome to see the development of theorising to develop our understanding of service user knowledge and where and how this fits alongside other types of knowledge that are necessary for social work students in their learning. This further enquiry is now increasingly evident not only in looking at the contribution of user knowledges to education but also to research. The routine evaluation of service user involvement in social work education, common to all of the papers in this second edition, adds considerably to developing the evidence base to support and promote the contribution of user knowledge to education and research. In this way, the status of user knowledge is enhanced through the provision of evidence which is regarded as objective, thereby challenging the criticism of service user knowledge being too individualistic and subjective.

There are however, still challenges to overcome; the major of these is the continuing need to build up a bank of outcome evidence. Much of this work is still short-term and process driven in nature and we need more longer term evidence to identify how the involvement of service users and carers in social work education, both qualifying and post-qualifying, impacts upon



the outcomes for service users and the quality of social work practice. There is also a need to continue to show that service user and carer's meaningful involvement in social work education is not merely a micro issue of improving individual practice, but also a macro issue challenging the grounds on which groups become 'othered' and where notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' are constructed. This is needed more than ever in a globalised world, still suffering the material effects of austerity politics, the increasing privatisation of social life and the growth of the independent and for-profit sectors alongside increasing ideologically motivated attacks on social welfare. It is the view of these editors; service user, academic, academic and service user, service user and academic, academic and potential service user, that social work education is richer and more relevant when it includes and learns from the experiences of those who are on the receiving end of social work practice.

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