

Title: *Social work students as Community Partners in a Family Intervention Programme.*

Key words: Social work education; family intervention; community education; community partners; parent participation; co-learning, social justice.

Abstract

Summary: This paper describes the findings from the evaluation of a UK initiative which engaged social work students as community partners within an educational based family intervention programme. Fourteen social work students in the first year of a BA (Hons) were placed in the programme to meet the volunteering requirements of their 'Community Project'. By engaging with the community-based family programme at an early stage in their education, students experienced the benefits of interventions, focussing on sustainability, citizenship and parent participation. We describe the approach and discuss the evaluation outcomes to illustrate the potential of utilising co-learning with families in social work education. In taking up the role of community partners, students observed first-hand the value of incorporating horizontal relationships into their learning and experienced direct knowledge exchange with service users at an early stage in their training. **Findings:** The findings suggest that this experience enabled students to connect with conceptualisations of macro alongside micro practice in their professional development as social workers. Further, connecting critical social theories with the direct experience of families promoted the learners own empowerment and conscientization. **Application:** This provided a means of embedding social work values and aspirations towards social justice in their future practice orientation.

Introduction

The contribution made by social work to communities is integral to its professional principles and values. Political shifts in public policy have moved social care towards a paradigm of greater individualism where responsibility for the support of vulnerable people is increasingly

located within civil society (Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). Combined with increased consumerism, these trends have given rise to an uneasy synergy between the empowering aspirations of social work and its technical, rational aspects resulting in further distancing of social workers from the communities that they serve (Das, 2016). This paper reports on an initiative which attempted to address this imbalance from the perspective of social work education. Social work students were provided with opportunities to engage with learning experiences which connected them with the macro issues underpinning social problems at an early stage in their training. The integration of micro practice (defined as functional learning and personal competence) with macro practice (learning to work with the physical, social, economic, political and cultural conditions impacting on children and families) requires deliberative engagement with diverse institutional and social contexts. Successful integration can both enhance the curriculum and give meaningful weight to the learning process.

The practice context for student Social Workers

Kaufman, Segal-Engelchin and Huss (2012) suggest that social work education and its partners have a powerful role in preparing students to undertake the dual task of working with individual service users' issues and problems combined with promoting social justice. Keeping these tasks in balance secures simultaneous commitment to the well-being of individuals, but also engages students in social action to support structural change on behalf of more disadvantaged communities (Abramovitz, 1993). The process by which students are socialised into the profession is important to achieving this integration of micro and macro practice. However, some evidence suggests that social work students grow increasingly conservative by the time they graduate by which time they express a distinct preference for micro practice (Bogo, Regehr, Katz, Logie, & Mylopoulos, 2011; Weiss, Spiro, Sherer & Korin-Langer, 2004). Similarly Csikai and Rozensky (1997) found that students enter social

work education with high levels of idealism. They describe these as “thoughts and behaviours that value and promote individual and societal change” (p.530) which tends to diminish and become more rigid as their training progresses. The types and quality of learning experiences and the design and targeting of appropriate educational intervention are crucial in shaping social workers attitudes and future practice preferences. Shier and Graham (2015) have even researched the impact of the socio-political context of practice on social worker happiness. Kaufman et al (2012) examined the influence of a range of factors within the learning process on the outcomes for students’ practice orientation. They found that educational curricula had a powerful impact upon the student’s social activism. This depended on their exposure to formal and informal socialization agents and the presence of role models in their academic and practice settings. They especially noted the influence of the conservative cultures of social services organisations on students practice learning experiences. The prioritisation of micro-practice within such cultures can dominate and exercise a strong hold at the expense of fostering a stronger commitment to environmental and contextual factors shaping social problems. Further, these experiences had a direct effect on future employment choices as students were more likely to go for posts in social services contexts when launching their career.

In the UK, Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) have questioned the extent to which the qualifying curriculum mirrors policy developments and they suggest that this poses a threat to the quality of education by overemphasising procedural knowledge. Whilst graduating social work students may be more ‘job-ready’, this can be at the expense of fostering other types of knowledge within the context of lifelong learning. Despite extensive reform of social work education in the UK, there is insufficient evidence about the effectiveness and impact of the qualifying curriculum on practice and how it is best delivered (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014). What is missing from the literature is a fuller discussion about the developmental

stages through which students are socialised into professional cultures. Socialisation is a dynamic process that encompasses the development of professional identity alongside knowledge and skills. Providing a range of diverse learning opportunities that address ideological and problematic beliefs and values can complement more instrumental learning experiences (Wahler, 2012). These tensions are illustrated in two UK Government commissioned reports into the quality of social work education (Crosidale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). These reported adversely on perceived domination of “theories of non-oppressive practice, empowerment and partnership” (Crosidale-Appleby, 2014 p12) at the expense of students gaining “an adequate grasp of the basics necessary for them to develop into competent and confident children’s social workers” (p.9). These polarised debates highlight the concerns about the gradual distancing of social work from its social justice origins and the impact on its relationship with the communities it serves (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). The public’s reaction and the political responses to a series of high profile serious case reviews have also highlighted the ongoing harsh realities of working in children’s services (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011). Munro (2011) described an increasingly bureaucratic practice environment which places a high priority on achieving outputs remote from the needs of service users and which demonstrated less regard for relationship and principle based work with children and families. These pose real dilemmas for social workers given the complexities in how to balance these with community based preventative strategies within a challenging fiscal climate and reduced resources. Punitive wide-ranging welfare reforms (Gray, 2014) have made it difficult to work positively where there are increasing structural inequalities and injustices (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). In summary, a diversity of approaches are required to achieve meaningful systems change which engage with relationship-based practice based on values of social justice (Ruch, 2011). The abjuration of risk-averse practices; the valorisation of professional judgement and

rejection of prescriptive approaches and continuing advocacy are needed to work with reforms that do not actually grapple with the root causes of failure in children and families social work (Cooper, 2004; Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014a).

Featherstone et al (2014a) advocate for a ‘moral legitimacy’ where support is located in the celebration of the strengths of families as well as their vulnerabilities. This takes account of the context in which considerable adversities “(re) locates workers as agents of hope and support” (p1737). Social investment in preventative work with children and families by ‘investing in children’ and developing ‘responsible parents’ has ‘considerable implications for policies and practices in the arena of family support’ (Featherstone & Manby, 2006, p5). Positioning social work in support of human and social capital prevents marginalisation of statutory social work to remedial action and implementing punitive welfare (Gray, 2014). Hardwick (2014) similarly laments the lack of advocacy in statutory work where a contested territory of advocacy lays bare the increasing erosion of social work’s professional values and principles. It is suggested that the culture of the profession is one that is currently under attack given the punitive welfare discourse. Direct, active and purposeful collaboration with families facing deprivation and disadvantage is a strong and necessary vehicle and requires a ‘re-imagining’ (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014b).

Background to the ‘Community Project’

The reform of social work education in England, UK during 2013-2014 provided an opportunity to revise and revitalise the curriculum and to effect some positive change in view of some of the issues raised above. Within the University where the authors are based, we wanted to move beyond individual or micro practice. Given the emphasis on public health, co-production and the call for systems change in how public services collaborate to achieve outcomes for children, the ‘Community Project’ , a 30 credit, foundational module in year

one of the Bachelor of Social Work, introduced students to concepts of 'community' in a holistic way. The curriculum enhances students' theoretical understanding of the context and background factors influencing the nature of social problems and society's responses. The learning and teaching strategy engaged students with theories of community, sustainability, citizenship and participation through examination of critical sociology and social policy and the institutions and structures that support service users and carers at a local level (see Gray & Webb, 2013). Students are engaged with key concepts and ideas through a detailed examination of the critical ideas of Freire (1973), Habermas (1981) and Foucault (1988). Students are encouraged to prepare for professional practice through opportunities to develop a range of direct skills such as active enquiry, synthesis and evaluation of information about the socio-economic and political realities in their local community. Through selected project work students made direct contact with the public and organisations providing support in their local community. This formed the basis for reflective analysis and in generating a portfolio of evidence for assessment on how students integrate theory with practice. The Community Project module is studied simultaneously in year one with modules addressing lifecourse theories and other foundational knowledge and skills for professional practice such as values, ethics and micro skills required to engage with service users. Students undertake outreach into their own community including a minimum of 5 days voluntary work. These diverse elements enable the student to build a broad portfolio of evidence which is linked to the outcomes expected to reach the relevant thresholds in their professional framework (The College of Social Work, 2010; Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012).

Background to the Family Intervention Programme

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a holistic, multi-systemic, parental involvement and relationship-building programme with a multi-family group approach. With its origins in

the USA, this well established programme has been delivered and evaluated internationally and noted for its robust independent methodology in evidencing impact on practice (Lindsay et al, 2010). FAST aims to build protective factors against stress for children, and thereby to increase their resilience, well-being and ability to learn (Lindsay et al. 2010). This community-strengthening programme is based on the social ecological theory of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), drawing on attachment and social learning theory as well as community development strategies. Groups are held after school for eight weeks, with a universal invitation to all families with children in a specified year group or age range (e.g. 3–5-year-olds). Participation is voluntary. Initial weekly groups are led by a trained, multi-agency team of professionals from health, education and social care, with parents from the local school as partners. The approach, works to prevent poor outcomes and to enable all children to achieve their full potential as well as support the transition from nursery to primary education (Fletcher, Fairtlough & McDonald, 2013).

Families recruited into FAST meet in collaborative groups of up to ten called “hubs” comprising at least one, and up to three, parent/carer partners with a child at the school; a school partner; and a community-based partner(s) from health, social work, or other non-government/community based organisations. Within the hub, each weekly session includes six key elements emphasising communication, self-help, peer support and one-to-one caring with children. These core components aim to strengthen the bonds within and between families, between families and the school, and to connect people within the community. Other goals include; increasing family functioning by strengthening parent/carer to child bonds in focused and specific ways; empowering parents to become primary preventative agents and improving the child’s behaviour and performance in school. These goals are both short and long term by giving children a good start with their parents as partners in the educational process. Evidence has demonstrated that this approach helps children and their

families (Fletcher et al, 2013). In Canada, social work engagement with the programme (Terrion and Hogrebe, 2007) was shown to provide a vehicle for embedding and expressing social work values. Social workers were able to build relationships outside of statutory interventions at a local community level based on the principles of participation. The model lends itself to active peer outreach within deprived areas beyond traditional services by engaging the most important people in the child and the carers' network through the support of respectful reciprocal partnerships, friendships and social connections and building of social capital in their local communities. A powerful aspect of FAST demonstrates shifting of power relationships through a co-productive approach during its delivery. Once the small groups are cohesive they become empowered through the formation of ongoing groups called FASTWORKS from shared to self-governance in relation to identifying and working towards local community goals. The theories underpinning FAST are recognisable to social work, as it builds protective factors and reduces risk factors (Terrion and Hogrebe, 2007).

Students as community partners

The volunteering opportunities afforded by the community partners' role within FAST offered an ideal opportunity for students following the Community Project. Students were offered a tangible and meaningful placement with a clear structure for supporting preparation for assessed practice and for integrating macro and micro knowledge and skills. The role of a community partner is to provide opportunities for parents/carers and teachers to engage in more broad-based interactions with the neighbourhood and community agencies. The number and quality of the connections between settings in which a young child spends time (for example her/his family, school, day care, community services) is thought to have implications for her/his development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Community partners model roles such as social work, through their direct involvement, so as to contribute to developing

trusting relationships. This in turn is thought to encourage families to seek assistance and encourage external agencies to support the ongoing development of the FASTWORKS community group. Community partners engage in all of the training and review sessions; assist with recruitment to the programme; co-facilitate parent/carer self-help groups with Parent Partners; coach and give practical assistance to families during all of the programme activities. For students, the benefits of being in the role of community partner involved the opportunity to broaden students' understanding of working with families in their own community setting and to engage with strength based approaches to community social work practice (Featherstone et al, 2014a). Given the rigorous evaluation aspects of FAST, students also glimpsed what is meant by the impact of 'evidence' on practice and being able to critique it. As discussed earlier, the role of transformative learning and meta-analyses of learning theories are contested and conceptually challenging within the field of professional learning for practice, especially social work. Pilkington's (2010) concepts were useful for developing a pedagogic framework in the Community Project which embraces the notion of professional capital, critical professionalism and the idea of providing learning spaces and enabling structures to support learning that engages with macro practice and social justice. The design of the FAST initiative lent itself to selecting purposeful opportunities for learning which also formed the basis for the evaluation in terms of the outcomes for students that engaged with it.

Engaging community partners had proved a challenge in getting the right people involved and strengthening more capacity in the model overall. Student participation in FAST was voluntary and offered as an enrichment activity. Seventeen out of thirty-eight students initially signed up out of which fourteen students proceeded with placements (there was a small drop out after the initial information giving session). A small local pedagogic grant facilitated practical support for students with fares, expenses and essential administrative

support to the project team to co-ordinate the students' placements and evaluation. Students had 1–2 days per week in their timetable to undertake project work so these 'placements' fitted well. A brief matching process using a self-completed proforma lined them to the nearest programme. The remainder of this paper reports on the outcomes of the evaluation. We discuss the findings on how students were able to link micro and macro knowledge and skills in their practice development in the context of co-learning opportunities in community based education settings.

Project evaluation methodology

The evaluation framework was embedded in the project design and aimed to explore the following:

- Outcomes for students through their engagement with FAST in relation to developing perspectives on community based social work;
- Experience of working in FAST on the students' development of knowledge and skills for preventative and partnership working;
- Impact of taking up the role of community partner on the student's perception of the role of social work in relation to micro and macro practice.

Several sources of data were captured in the evaluation process. For a number of reasons, usually associated with lack of time, not all of the fourteen students participated in some aspects of the evaluation process. The sources included:

1. Student pre and post evaluation of the FAST preparation training using an online survey tool. This generated feedback on the usefulness of the training and qualitative data on student's expectations, feelings of readiness and motivation to engage with FAST. Twelve students completed this online survey fully.

2. A focus group with six of the participating students which was conducted towards the end of the project based on the broad three topics outlined above.
3. Documentary analysis of all of the fourteen participating student's written reflective commentary on their experiences of FAST from their summative portfolios.

Telephone interviews with the co-ordinator in each of the three participating FAST sites were undertaken which focused on the experience of having social work students as community partners. This data was limited and used to contextualise the findings from the above data only.

Students were invited to keep a 5 minute digital diary at three significant points in the programme based on loose guidelines and were given a digital voice recorder for this task. However, students perceived this burdensome due to competing demands on their time and did not complete this task.

Qualitative data from sources 1-3 were collated. One member of the research team read these as whole and coded the data to generate areas of comparative interest from the three sources in relation to the evaluation questions. The coded data was discussed and agreed with the second author following whom; emergent themes were identified and agreed. The selected themes discussed in this paper are: negotiating professional identity in the community; the levelling effect of participation and collaboration in fostering empathy; and the impact of co-learning on linking macro theory to practice in social work.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Middlesex University Social Work Ethics Committee.

Students were informed of the evaluation criteria and method and their informed consent was obtained. The evaluation was kept relatively low profile so as not to add stress to the

students' workload. Students were provided with an access point via an appointed project administrator to ensure good communication, data collection and independent management of the project throughout, as well as to ensure timely reimbursing of expenses. The final phase of evaluation from students' portfolios was only undertaken once all the students had completed the formal assessment to avoid any conflict of interest.

Findings and discussion of findings

The remainder of this paper reports on the three themes emerging from analysis of the qualitative data described above.

Negotiating professional identity

Drawing on some of the feedback from the pre-training survey completed by only twelve of the fourteen students involved, seven students stated that they were motivated by the opportunity of undertaking direct work with children and families which they perceived as vital in social work. They were inspired by the unique orientation of FAST which challenged their ideas about what social workers actually did. Two aligned this opportunity with an easier way of securing the necessary voluntary work required for the module, and one wanted to gain personal insight as a parent. Seven out of the twelve students who completed the survey had also had prior experience of schools in their roles as parents and three other students had volunteer experience within schools. One student commented:

"I would like to come out of the programme empowered to go out there once I qualify as a social worker, to use the skills learned and help other families I can that might perhaps not have access to FAST". (social work student, post training questionnaire)

Negotiating the status of 'community partner' but with a social work label was perceived to be a challenge at a number of levels. Firstly it challenged students' expectations for how

families would accept them and secondly, it challenged other professionals involved in the programme to recognise their contribution. Students were anxious and anticipated families being wary of them because of negative associations between social workers and removing children:

“To start with it was a stressful situation and I was terrified to even stand in front of the parents and the children for the FAST ‘hello’. However as the weeks went by I felt at ease and I can tell that my performance was improving. I started to get to know the people more and I even warmed up to some of the staff”. (social work student, focus group)

These transitions in role engaged students in reflecting on their own personal identities. One black student placed in a suburban white middle class area was concerned about how she would be accepted. This provided an insight into the complexity of power and diffusion of power between social workers and service users which transcended professional roles alone. Students explored unstated assumptions about their own status as potential social workers, and made connections with critical theories.

“Yes so it was learning how to speak to the parent and not tell them what to do. I will probably take that into my placement, not belittle them or not make them think they have not done their job properly”. (social work student, focus group)

The experience of being placed in someone else’s professional and personal space which made students highly accountable for their perceived roles generated discourses about whose ideas and knowledge had most authority and the mode of authority. Students were forced to consider whose experiences count most in relation to the conceptualisation of social problems and their proposed solution:

“Parents telling you things when they get to know you – loosened up. They even told us, when we hear about social workers, we think they are taking our kids and looking at how we parent our kids”. (social work student, focus group)

Besides beginning to learn how to negotiate with potential users of social work services, students also experienced the thorny and live issues of constructing their identities within interprofessional work and recognised aspects of traditional hierarchies between professional groups. They considered the impact of the environment on practice as well as the potential institutionalisation of roles within a school environment:

“An area of concern voiced by FAST team members was team dynamics and various issues discussed included clarity surrounding roles and responsibilities, clash of personalities, lack of communication and involvement in decision-making, role of senior management and relationship between hubs”. (extract from the end of project FAST evaluation report).

Overall there was a mixed response to group dynamics within the FAST teams where students were community partners. Some reported ‘feel good’ factors around team work to deliver the programme and some reported a range of issues associated with team and power dynamics between themselves and other professionals. Areas of concern included the absence of an appropriately diverse team, dealing with conflict and the general welcome and support to them as social work students provided by the school:

“I found working as part of a team on the FAST programme challenging.....as I was not able to meet the other team members until the day the programme started. I believe that initial communication was lost and I was not able to bond with the team beforehand. When the programme began we started with one team of staff and by the second week there was a new team. This made me reflect about changes when

practicing in social work, just as families get used to one person they may be subjected to change". (social work student, focus group)

These insights reinforce that social work practitioners need to be able to achieve a good sense of coherence in order to anticipate more challenging processes in their working environment and to apply knowledge, resources and skills in interprofessional working towards managing various situations that can be seen as a challenge rather than a threat. Antonovsky (1993) refers to this sense of coherence as a necessary resource in the process of developing a professional identity. Coherence includes being perceived as an ideal partner to assist families with signposting to relevant support and to reinforce the work already being undertaken by other professionals with families in the community.

The levelling effect of partnership and collaboration in fostering empathy

Students recognised the challenges of participation for some parents/carers and the value of providing structure and transparency to support an enabling involvement:

"For some taking part I noticed that they struggled to articulate their views, either because they have a particular health condition, a language difference or find it culturally difficult to challenge others, and in order to successfully take part, information needs to be clear and accessible, and confidence-building experiences may be needed" (extract from social work students written reflective commentary)

Building trust with families was seen as important in promoting collaborative working, requiring students and parent partners to have an open attitude, to value longer-term relationships and to respect autonomy. Being involved in a shared and distributed model of learning encouraged students to explore the value of collaboration, particularly in overcoming the hierarchical imperatives identified earlier. Their reflective commentaries reflected an applied appreciation of what it really means to disperse power in relation to the theories about

‘co-production’ that they were studying. Students commented on the powerful influence of experiencing reciprocity in their hubs and how the structure of FAST activities were useful in emphasising mutual learning, experimentation and reflective practice:

“We were almost scared of each other at first. Our trainer said, ‘be on the same level, don’t raise your voice’, awkward, but on week 3, when we needed each other it became more free and more inquisitive, felt more natural”. (social work student, focus group)

Working directly with parents and their children provided a rich source for students’ experience of the day-to-day reality of parents and children’s lives. They gave examples of putting themselves in the families’ shoes which generated new insights;

“As a would-be social worker, I now know that it will be my job in the future to be an advocate of change to my service-users; whether I speak up for them in person or empower them to do so themselves, I will hopefully be helping them realise they hold the power shape their own futures”. (extract from social work students written reflective commentary)

Featherstone et al (2014a) stress how adopting a language of support opens up thinking about what is going on for those involved in solving problems and to articulate what is needed at different times. They assert that ‘support’ allows for a “recognition of the chronicity of need; it is not intrinsically tied to individualised change, to ‘responsibilisation’ or to a tyrannical and unforgiving notion of time. Building on insights from the literature on ethics of care Featherstone et al (2014a) suggest that giving and receiving care throughout the lifecourse brings out dependency and vulnerability in all aspects of the human condition (p1475). Several aspects of the data captured from students reflected this interdependence and

facilitated active questioning of how far these are recognised in the policies and practices they observed:

“it is paramount to understand the community you live in or work in, educating oneself will open up a better understanding of the individuals that you may come in contact with; for example the issues effecting that community such as the impact of bedroom tax and cap in benefits” (extract from student written reflective commentary)

Students recognised the contribution of different relationships such as between families and between families and the team as well as those with neighbours and wider communities. Students referred to the importance of negotiating skills, guiding and exploring different options in their approach to what on the surface appeared to be a behavioural problem with their child. They appreciated how these processes contributed towards building the parent and child’s confidence in each other, but also recognised their own confidence in developing negotiating and supporting skills.

“During the sessions I observed parents opening up to each other and this was a moment of joy”. (social work student, focus group)

Students identified potential leadership in families, for example the skills one brought from her role in a local job centre to others who were unemployed. She observed that this could have been utilised more. The need to recognise and encourage leadership within social work education is another catalyst by which individuals, groups and communities can contribute to social work education and enable leadership to be critically and realistically evaluated. This approach may offer ‘deep value’ (Bell and Smerdon, 2011), a term which attempts to capture the value created when the human relationships between people delivering and people using public services are effective and conditions are present that nourish confidence, inspire self-esteem, unlock potential and erode inequality with the power to transform relationships and

services (Hafford-Letchfield, Lambley, Spolander and Cocker, 2014). Students recognised that service user participation can be greatly increased if issues of power are discussed in an honest and open way, and in this context, the need to value and give credence to participation. However, they also suggested how this approach can generate resistance within organisations such as schools where staff are unused to working with and valuing diverse interests, as well as more open approaches to power-sharing and decision-making. One student reflected on the challenges and rhetoric of participation:

“Being completely honest, I found it quite difficult working with the parents and school partners at first, as I felt they were unable to see the outcomes, and was stuck in their way of thinking, stating that parents would be uncomfortable, and that they already know their parents”. (extract from social work students written reflective commentary)

This student referred to a parent who asked lots of questions but which were not valued by the school based staff. This caused a barrier between school staff and the student when she tried to address this. Some students felt that they were also ‘treated as outsiders’ but that this was a double edged sword as they were able to be more open minded about the dynamics within the team and with the parents as a result. Many of the student’s reflective commentaries and feedback however revealed that they were able to recognise that they were effecting change within a relatively short time, and they spoke passionately about this:

“I can feel the full force and implications of decisions and legislations passed; for example cuts to benefits, which was evident during my volunteering role (FAST) as mothers would voice their issues and difficulties with other parents. During my time at x Primary School culture and religion was paramount because I could see that people from the same culture, race or religious beliefs bonded faster together, spoke in their languages and had common interests (macrosystem), this illustrates the

impact of culture and identity within communities” (extract from social work students
written reflective commentary)

Examination of how learning is informed by user perspectives can, as this theme demonstrates, provide a source of knowledge from which theory building can start to take place. Recognition that knowledge is professionally constructed and value laden in its definition and transmission in this situation appeared to lead to a two-way transaction, building on the knowledge and experience of service users according to their perceived needs. Some students explicitly recognised how setting the terms of assessment or provision constitutes an important aspect of the power that a professional possesses. They commented on how using expert knowledge to seek information can potentially be used to impose professional values and perspectives leading to an uneven playing field.

The impact of co-learning in linking macro theories to practice in social work

Beresford (2007) identified three elements which comprise what service users and carers value most about social workers. The first is the adoption of a social approach by seeing people within their broader social context and responding accordingly. The second is where social workers use relationships to build trust, empower and support people's own empowerment. The third aspect is how service users value social workers personal qualities which make encounters with them a positive experience such as warmth, respect, being non-judgemental, listening; treating people with respect and being trustworthy. Developing these within a learning environment can help students to utilise and synthesise both micro and macro approaches to practice. Data from the evaluation provided rich examples of how the experiences of working directly in the community increased the students' capacity for compassion and concern and helped them recognise and respond to the different expectations and experiences of the families they were working with. Students commented on the value of

putting groupwork theory into practice and the different skills needed in this context. They also valued the opportunities to reflect on their own interpersonal skills such as listening and asking for feedback directly from families and other partners in the project. They were particularly struck by how different people saw the situation and how particular aspects of the interventions being used were seen as helpful. These often taken for granted by social workers as one student put it:

“Freire talked about hope and argued that the coming of people together and provision of safe environment to express their opinion about their challenges was a basis for adult education. FAST does not lecture but rather provides a respectful structure for parents to discover the wisdom they already know”. (extract from social work students written reflective commentary)

This student commentary demonstrated some of the rudimentary principles involved in praxis, an ‘action-reflection and action, action in reflection, and dialogue’. (Freire , 2000, p 72) and hinted at the benefits of students interacting where knowledge emerges only through which Freire referred to as; “invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p72). Freire’s concept of ‘praxis’ involves the integration of tacit, experiential and formal knowledge and theories. Payne (2005) further suggests that these are reflected upon in and out of action and transformed or manifested in creative action as an important precursor to social change. One student made a direct link to these processes in her learning:

“Parent group time brought us together in a safe environment to talk to each other about their challenges of daily living creates a basis for adult education as Freire mentions that more profound learning occurs for adults if they express their own voice”. (extract from social work students written reflective commentary)

Levy, Ben, and Shlomo Itzhaky (2014) in exploring how students develop social values like empathy in different settings, suggested that this may in part come from a focus on ‘looking outside’, i.e., looking toward the environment, and paying attention to what others are experiencing (p756). They suggest that this helps to explain how students with strong social values can feel empathy toward others, whereas strong personal values do not necessarily contribute to high empathic ability.

”I have come to realise the importance of social capital. Like physical capital, social capital has a tangible worth in society and can be used as a dynamic entity to create more. By volunteering with FAST, I was able to identify this theory being playing out in reality..... Not only did the programme benefit those who signed up to it, but it gave the volunteers who ran it, myself included, the opportunity to add social capital to a good cause”. (extract from social work students written reflective commentary)

Praxis is embodied when a social worker, through reflective and reflexive processes, develops the aspiration and creative incentive to improve practice and make changes previously reflected upon. These changes could be made within social systems and or in social relationships and those students who had the experience of working in FAST demonstrated some strong incentives towards macro practice through praxis. One student specifically commented on how the experience of working directly with families from a wide variety of backgrounds had enhanced her understanding of emancipatory practice.

Giles et al (2010) identified the value of practicum experiences to provide opportunities for transformational learning where students are engaged intellectually, emotionally and socially to think about their professional practice. It is within these learning contexts that students are encouraged to critically consider how their own personal histories coincide with their work and with others—whether it is working alongside individuals, families, groups or

communities. Some of the experiences conveyed in the evaluation data represent what Marlow, Appleton, Chinnery and Stratum (2015) have described as “where the ‘rubber hits the road’”. Students discovered the complexities of applying their learning to professional social work encounters and came up against tensions when their personal, agency and service users’ ways of seeing the world collided (Marlow et al. 2015). Such tensions may arise through power relationships, the development of professional identity and questions of reflexivity where previous assumptions are possibly tested for the first time in significant and profound ways.

Limitations and issues

This paper has not addressed the limitations and critiques of parenting programmes (see Featherstone et al. 2014b) where funding streams are accused of increasingly tying a range of agencies into programmes of behaviour change influenced by central government diktats. Featherstone et al. (2014b) suggest that parenting programmes advocate for the use of early help rather than intervention and calls for a more open system. Hardwick (2014) suggests that the peripheral nature of advocacy in statutory work runs contrary to social work values and principles and diverts them from listening to and acting upon the wishes of service users.

This thesis has emerged from both formal reviews of social work and surveys of practitioners own voices. These have uncovered a severe imbalance between the times social workers spend in direct contact with the community and administrative tasks. This practice initiative has attempted to ground students learning in the experiences of community issues before they are able to instrumentalise or pathologise the real hardships faced by deprived communities.

Whilst the model evaluated here is based on family intervention programmes, this model and approach to co-learning could be adapted with a more diverse community based projects.

These could involve grass-root activism or capacity building and models of empowerment

where direct engagement provides opportunities for students to appreciate the everyday lives and realities of service users and which reflect theories and knowledge of an authentic 'community'.

We have also not addressed service users own feedback in this particular paper which is essential to understand the whole picture particularly the impact of students as community partners on the FAST programme partners and the parent/carer's own experiences. We also learned a number of lessons from the implementation of this initiative about the practical issues associated with logistical issues and pressure on students' time to do voluntary work, particularly when assignments were due. The project carried some resource implications but also made use of existing learning resources in the community to which social work education could both contribute to and exploit further.

Almost without exception however, the students commented on the valuable opportunity provided and spoke very passionately about it. The findings from the evaluation report on the short term benefits suggest that this emphasis on co-learning enables students to connect with conceptualisations of macro as well as micro practice in their professional development as social workers. Connecting with Freirian pedagogy promotes learners own empowerment and conscientization as a means of embedding social work values and aspirations towards social justice. Further work is ongoing to explore how this early community based learning experience might be evaluated to consider the longer term impacts on the students' formal practice learning placements or as a model for qualified social workers engagement with families within their locality.

Conclusions

Recent reforms in the UK to social work education have been described as a watershed moment for social work (Taylor and Bogo, 2014) where radical changes to both structure and

processes have stressed the concept of capability. Developing capability is dependent on having the opportunities to develop professional behaviours and ethical thinking in practice that embraces notions of equality and social justice alongside the development of personal skills and qualities particularly those that emphasise relationship-based practice. Eraut (1998) suggested that capability may provide assurance that the learner has sufficient conceptual and ethical knowledge to continue to learn. The integration of the students micro practice which enables them to functionally learn and achieve personal competence with macro practice which is about learning to work with the wider structural conditions impacting on children and families, requires deliberative engagement with diverse intuitional and social contexts to both enhance the curriculum and to give meaningful weight to the learning process. This paper reports on a model where the deliberate joining together of a community based family project with students pre-practice learning deemed the importance of co-learning which helped early integration of micro and macro practice. Introducing timely opportunities when social workers were forming their ideas about social problems and policy issues that impact on families and on their own social work professional identities enabled them to be directly influenced by the real experiences of those they were learning about. The implicit curriculum of the Community Project comprised elements such as the voices expressing the values and real priorities of families as well as their indirect participation in social work education. It introduced 'context' as a core learning environment and the data from this evaluation demonstrated the students' curiosity and interest in different modes of practice that were capable of changing and improve family minded practice. Within the classroom setting students were able to recognise broader changes in political discourses about families and parenting in social work and make a shift from talking about 'problem families' to 'families with problems' (see Featherstone et al. 2014b). Further, by building relationships outside of more traditional interventions, students were able to develop their own narratives about what

it means to be a social worker and learned how to set boundaries which developed positive regard and the potential for interdependency within communities.

Preston and Aslett (2014) propose an 'activist pedagogy' as a possible way to resist and subvert the neoliberal educational paradigm and to better integrate the principles and practice of social justice and anti-oppressive social work into the classroom. Critiques of the pedagogical practices of social work educators often take on the characteristics of neoliberal institutions. These pose a challenge for fostering and delivering learning experiences that deconstruct neoliberalism whilst encouraging a project of critical engagement towards (re)establishing both learners and educators to justice and equity. Supporting this with relevant early practice experiences such as those embedded in FAST and supported by the Community Project curriculum engaged with conscious and deliberative action to reflect the theory-practice-nexus (Habermas, 1983). In the face of constant criticism and external review, social work education needs to innovate and differentiate along those dimensions that they deem important and to develop their own identities related to the communities they serve.

Ethics

Middlesex University Social Work Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this study in February 2014 (Ref: SWESC1361).

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