



Service User Involvement and Coproduction in Social Work Education and Practice Development: A Narrative Review

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Keywords: Service User Involvement; Service User Participation; Coproduction; Social Work; Social Work Education.

Abstract

Aim: To examine empirical research studies relating to the involvement of service users and carers in social work education and practice.

Method: This was a small-scale narrative review based on a systematic search of three electronic databases: PsycINFO, Social Care On-Line, Social Services Abstracts. The studies were summarised and primary study findings were thematically analysed. The review is introduced, and study findings are discussed, with particular reference to the context of Northern Ireland social work practice.

Findings: Eleven studies were retrieved; nine from the UK, one from Australia and one from Netherlands and Belgium. The majority of literature retrieved in the review related to service user involvement in social work educational settings. Three main themes were identified from the included studies, these were; meaningful involvement, challenges and outcomes of service user involvement. There is a significant focus on what factors make the involvement of service users meaningful. With clear messages from service users that they regard feeling valued, making purposeful contributions, knowing the outcomes of their contributions and being paid as key indicators that their involvement is meaningful. Service users, carers, lecturers, social workers and social work students offer positive feedback on service user involvement and coproduction. Although, the literature suggests long established practices involving service users in educational settings, the work is not problem free and the range of challenges and

barriers as identified by service users, professionals and academics are discussed. In terms of outcomes, these are largely articulated from the perspective of those service users or students involved in service user projects. Service users experienced an increase in their own personal skills, development, a growth in confidence and an increase in social opportunities were highlighted as being crucially important to them. Social work students report valuable insights into service user issues, an increase in knowledge and skills and opportunities to reflect upon their core social work values.

Conclusions: Whilst, the experience of service user involvement is largely positive, more focus on the inherent challenges and barriers to the involvement of service users in social work education would be prudent. There is an opportunity to focus on outcomes, more explicitly, identifying the factors that make involvement meaningful for the individual and effective in the development of social work practice. Empirical research has focussed on the education and training of social workers and the contributions that service users can make to it. There is limited research evidence to reflect how the approach is implemented in statutory social work practice. More research may contribute to the limited evidence base and development of useful frameworks and models that can be practically applied across all social work settings.

Introduction

Service user involvement, in the education and training of social workers has gathered momentum in the UK since the early 2000s (Duffy, Chaitali, & Davidson, 2013). In the wider social work practice context, there has been a long history of service involvement. Irvine, Molyneux, & Gillman, (2015) suggest that it is not a mainstream approach, but Rantamaki, (2017) suggests there is now some momentum to involve service users, in more meaningful ways, across social work practice areas. Rantamaki suggests that the increased focus can be

associated with efforts to create more sustainable, economically viable, ways of organising social care and supporting people and communities. This, more recent, interest in the area is highlighted by the emergence of coproduction. The term coproduction is used to suggest a deeper engagement between service providers and service users during service development and delivery (Boyle & Harris, 2009). Stephens, Ryan-Collins, & Boyle, (2008) argue that it is an effort to harness the strengths and abilities of individuals to improve the delivery of public services. It should be conceptualised as a process where service users/carers work alongside staff (Boyle, Clark, & Burns, 2006).

Service user involvement is clearly legislated for, and now enshrined in policy statements in Northern Ireland (Askheim, Beresford, & Heule, 2016). For the past decade it has been a legal requirement, in Northern Ireland, to ensure the active and effective involvement of service users, carers and the public in Health and Social Care policy development and the delivery of training and services (DHSSPS, 2009). The ten year plan for Health and Social Care transformation, set out in ‘Health and Wellbeing 2026, Delivering Together’ is driving a move away from crisis management and reactive responses toward more inclusive and collaborative service delivery, in partnership with service users and carers (DOH, 2016). Coproduction is set out as the preferred approach to practice, service development and strategic delivery in phase two of the Social Work Strategy 2017-2022 (DOH, 2012).

This approach is a strategic priority for the Quality Improvement Strategy that sets out aspirations for the active involvement of frontline practitioners and service users in improving practice and service delivery (DOH, 2011). Furthermore, in response to the growing crisis in adult social care the Department of Health has set out 16 proposals that aim to bring about radical change by putting “citizens at the heart” of decision-making, design and delivery of services (DOH, 2017).

The legal mandate is clear, but it should be noted that, there is some scepticism about the current momentum around coproduction. Cameron, Moore, Nutt, & Chambers, (2019) raise concerns about rhetoric around the involvement of service users, suggesting there is a risk of submerging service users in market driven and consumer-based models, to the detriment of more inclusive and rights-based approaches. It has been argued that the motivation to make these changes is related to political and economic challenges facing the welfare state (Pestoff, 2009; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011). Coproduction has been argued to be a form of circumvention, of state responsibility to provide quality services in the social care sector.

The current authors would suggest that, in the main, coproduction is used to drive service quality, but would acknowledge commentators concerns that it needs properly resourced, providing training, expertise, and support for those involved (Evans, 2012). “Coproduction may be ‘value for money’, but it usually cannot produce value without money” (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012 p. 1137). In this, sometimes contentious, context the current review has attempted to draw together findings to date from empirical research on service user involvement and coproduction. We have cast a wide net in an effort to capture any literature, which can provide an insight into efforts to involve service users.

We were interested in providing an insight into how this emerging field of study is developing, any early indications of research priorities and, crucially, any insights into learning which can help inform future efforts to engage service users and carers in social work training and service design and delivery.

Method

The literature search followed guidance on systematic bibliographic searching (McGinn, Taylor, McColgan, & McQuilkan, 2014; Reed & Baxter, 2009). Search terms piloted for two

concept groupings: service user involvement; and social work training, policy and practice. The search formulae were deployed in electronic databases: PsycINFO, Social Care On-line and Social Services Abstracts. No date filters were applied however material returned relates to studies carried out during the last decade, with the earliest study dated 2009. The last search was carried out on 19th January 2018. A total of 581 articles were returned. These were screened by the first author using a priori criteria relating to the topic area, accepted definitions of service user involvement and coproduction, and the inclusion of social work training, practice, policy. Empirical research evidence was identified with particular attention paid to quality of methods used (Best, Taylor, Manktelow, & McQuilkin, 2014, p. 1). Following initial screening, the full text of sixty-seven studies were sourced and screened in more depth (as outlined in Fisher, Qureshi, Hardyman, & Homewood, 2006). Eleven of these studies were deemed to satisfy the selection criteria. Data was extracted from each study as follows: country of origin, study design, sample size, method of data collection and the main findings of the study. A thematic analysis was used to identify key themes across the resultant dataset (Popay, Roberts, Sowden, Petticrew, Arai, Rodgers, Britten, Roen, & Duffy, 2006).

Findings

The review identified eleven studies relating to service user involvement in social work education and practice development. Of the included studies, eight were qualitative and three were mixed methods. All, but one of the studies, (Davies, Gray, & Webb, 2014) relate to the education and training of social workers. We found that primary study findings fell into one or more of three overarching themes: meaningful involvement, challenges/barriers, and outcomes.

Meaningful Involvement

This was arguably the most dominant theme across primary study findings. The majority of studies (Anghel & Ramon, 2009; Davies, Gray, & Webb, 2014; Driessens, McLaughlin, &

Doorn, 2016; Levy, Aiton, Doig, Dow, & Brown, 2016; MacSporran, 2014; Rooney, Unwin, & Osborne, 2016; Unwin, Rooney, Osborne, & Cole, 2017; Webber & Robinson, 2012) offered insights into factors that made the process meaningful from a service user perspective, and the concept of empowerment featured significantly. In a mixed methods study MacSporran, (2014) identified several factors, from a service user perspective, that contribute to their involvement being meaningful: undertaking purposeful, organised, structured roles with remuneration for contributions made, or work carried out. Other studies have reported that service user involvement has been meaningful due to the inherent opportunities for educational and career development (Davies et al. 2014).

Five studies provided examples of greater user control, where service users undertake roles as co-researchers (Rooney et al. 2016; Unwin et al. 2017; Tanner, Littlechild, Duffy, & Hayes, (2017); Webber & Robinson, 2012; Driessens et al. 2016). Webber & Robinson, (2012) suggested that the regular and sustained involvement of service users is required to build relationships, to support richer contributions and realise meaningful involvement. Levy et al. (2016) describe how the absence of some of these factors can contribute to service users' feelings of disempowerment.

Finally, Farrow (2014) reports on key messages from professionals and academics in his study. Most notably that service users are aware that their involvement is tokenistic, when it is tokenistic. Farrow argues that service users must be involved in purposeful tasks, not simply because professionals regard it as the right thing to do or because it is a legal or policy requirement.

Challenges

Anghel & Ramon, 2009; MacSporran, 2015; Farrow, 2014; Rooney, et al. 2016; Davies et al. 2014; and Webber & Robinson, 2012;) all explored the challenges or barriers to service user

involvement. In a peer led study, Rooney et al. (2016) focus extensively on barriers experienced by service users from a service user perspective. Findings categories related to; accessibility, organisational barriers and personal barriers. In relation to organisational barriers, there was recognition of the difficulties of recruiting new service users, and issues with diversity of those service users currently involved. The timing of meetings, difficulties in arranging respite care for relatives, poor communication, excessive travel distance and low rates of remuneration were sub-themes relating to accessibility.

Davies et al. (2014) describe how service users articulated such operational challenges as a lack of clarity around their role and function. Limited opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes and an absence of feedback on the outcomes their work. Some had withdrawn from their roles, feeling labelled and having encountered a lack of respect for their lived experience. They identified a need for more training and support to develop the skills and knowledge required to contribute effectively.

Anghel & Ramon, (2009) underline the main barriers to service user involvement as insufficient funding and resources. The impact places additional demands and pressures on professionals. Therefore, detracting from the time they have to create the conditions and structures required to support service users and advance the approach. In a more recent study, Tanner et al. (2017) followed newly qualified social workers into the workplace. They reported excessive workloads and stressful conditions, along with other factors related to culture, values and attitudes of colleagues and managers were identified as the main barriers to continuation of service user involvement approaches outside of university setting (Tanner et al. 2017). Farrow, (2014) also highlighted practitioner workload pressures as a potential problem, suggesting that professionals cannot undertake service user involvement in a meaningful way if there is no recognition or support for the challenges that they face.

Outcomes

Eight studies reported findings related to the outcomes of service user involvement: Angel & Ramon, 2009; MacSporran (2015); Driessens et al. (2016); Unwin et al. (2017); Davies et al. (2014); Tanner et al. (2017); Levy et al. (2016); Hughes (2017). This theme captured findings that fell outside the focus on how service users were involved to more scrutiny of what actually happens because of their involvement (Levy et al. 2016, p. 868).

Where service users have articulated their own personal outcomes, they describe enhanced user control. Good outcomes for service users are directly derived from the opportunity to engage in purposeful work. Where they feel appreciated, valued, and included and have the opportunity for skills and knowledge acquisition that contributes to increased feelings of independence, personal confidence and competence (Macsporrnan, 2015). Similarly, Davies et al. (2014) reported on service users personal outcomes as increased confidence, enhanced feelings of worth and purpose.

The study carried out by Angel & Ramon, (2009) partially focused on student learning outcomes and found that students reported a deeper understanding of lived experience and a greater awareness of the impact of social services on individual's lives. Studies that are more recent, have reported similar findings, students feel they achieve a greater insight into service user needs and a greater understanding of the importance of relationships from the input of service users (Driessens et al. 2016). In addition, Unwin et al. (2017) find that students experienced changes in terms of their perceptions of people with disabilities and reported that this learning would impact on their future practice as social workers.

Hughes (2017) took an open-ended narrative approach to seek insight into the impact of service user involvement on students subsequent practice after qualification. Findings, were organised under four central themes, enhanced awareness of the lived experience; taking on board

suggestions of good practice from service users and carers; developing a more critical 'real life' understanding; culture of recognising service users and carers as experts.

Discussion

This paper endeavours to bring together a modest number of published empirical research studies relating to the involvement of service users in social work education and practice development. The included studies illustrate the innovation and creativity that social work educators have demonstrated over the past decade. In all cases, it was clear that primary study authors were aligned to the general view that service user involvement is good practice, and fits well with the values of the social work profession.

We would also point out that conversations are changing, in relation to service user involvement. There is less focus on how service users are involved and more on how meaningful and effective the involvement has been (Levy et al. 2016). Establishing what is meaningful and from whose perspective presents a challenge in itself. The findings suggest that there is no real mechanism to do this. Farrow, (2014) suggests the need to set out a criteria to clearly define what meaningful involvement is. Critical perspectives from service users are valuable and can provide a good insight into how they really experience involvement with professionals, and although, the evidence suggests that service user involvement is well established in social work education, a range challenges and barriers remain.

Student learning outcomes dominate the discussion around service user involvement (Unwin et al. 2017) in social work education. Although, this is valuable in its own right, results are often inconclusive; more robust evaluation is needed to produce hard evidence of transformative change in learning, practice and the behaviour of students (Rooney et al. 2016). Robust methods are needed to consider the impact of such service user involvement in

educating future social workers and how subsequent practice is changed or improved as a result.

There are only two studies in the current review that have considered the impact or outcome of service user involvement on social work students' subsequent practice (Tanner et al. 2017; Hughes 2017). Hughes goes some way toward establishing the value in terms of the difference that is made to social work interventions and how social workers interact with service users.

Only one study, (Davies et al. 2014, p. 119) relates to social work practice itself and interrogates notions of service user involvement as a vehicle of empowerment and social justice. Suggesting that there is a need to break down existing barriers by changing attitudes and redistributing power. The included studies illustrate the potential dividends of enriching the learning and practice of social workers and more importantly including and empowering the people social workers support. The social work profession have an opportunity to build on this work and integrate the approach as a mainstream social work method. Farrow (2014) suggests that there is a gap between policy and practice, in that the rhetoric around service user involvement in policy does not always translate directly to social work practice.

Conclusion

This review brought together some of the broad themes that emerged in empirical research studies related to service user involvement. Collectively, the studies highlight the value of service users' involvement to the professional development of social workers. They map the significant progress over the past ten years, in developing genuine partnerships with service users and the cultural shift that was required in order to make this possible. This has required those working in educational settings to be open to new learning and knowledge and more importantly open to power sharing. It is notable that the term coproduction did not feature significantly in the published research. Nonetheless, there was an abundance of evidence that

demonstrated partnership and collaborative working, that went well beyond the basic notion of service user involvement.

There is some exploration of the inherent challenges and barriers, with some concern about resources, funding and time are core themes. There are concerns about demands placed on service users and about the support required for meaningful involvement. More critical examination is required on the day to day pressures and demands for service users and for those professional staff willing to engage in such innovative work practices. In addition, there is a need for on-going evaluation of the difference that involving service users makes to both social work practice and to service user outcomes.

Within the current review the majority of studies, with the exception of one, focus on projects implemented in university settings. It would be helpful to gain insight into what is stopping it from becoming mainstream in the work place. Particularly, when the evidence is overwhelmingly pointing to the fact that involving service users presents opportunities for social workers across all settings, and promotes rights-based social work, better connected with service user groupings and communities.

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