

# Service User Involvement in Social Work Education – Current Discourses

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## Abstract

In this contribution, the author briefly introduces the roots of service user involvement in teaching social work and makes some annotations on terminology. Some research and its outcomes are introduced and Webber and Robinson's two models of service user involvement are described: the empowerment model and the outcome focused model. It is argued that they should not be seen as distinct models, but as two important factors that complement each other and that, in fact, empowerment is one aspect of the outcome. A selection of obstacles to meaningful involvement is presented and a few suggestions for further research are given. Research should focus on both process and outcome. Furthermore it is argued why professionals should value participatory research more.

## 1. Introduction

During the past two decades, the attention towards service user involvement in social work education has been growing. Thanks to new guidelines (DH, 2001), it is mandatory to actively involve service users and carers in all stages of social work university education in the United Kingdom. This means that service users and carers need to have a say in the development of a new social work curriculum, the teaching activities themselves and also in practice training. The latest development in the area has been mainly thanks to the consistent engagement of service user groups. The initiative came largely from disabled people's movements, who wanted to receive higher quality services. These people were willing to actively contribute to the

improvement of the services, also because they directly affect their own lives.

As I will outline later on, the level of involvement still varies greatly between the different fields mentioned above. Other countries do not have regulations regarding service user involvement in social work education, but a growing number of academics are conducting research on service user involvement and some universities have voluntarily chosen to involve service users in their social work training programmes.

In the United Kingdom the shift towards a proactive service user involvement has been accompanied by a grassroots development (Branfield, Beresford & Levin, 2007), initiated by service user groups who thought they needed to have a say in social work education, as they consider themselves *experts by experience*. This development seeks to eradicate the widespread tokenistic approach of inviting service users to lectures in order to share their life stories with social work students. The students and lecturers draw profit from the service user's experience, insight and expertise, while the service user is left with nothing, if not, in some cases, personal, embarrassing and hurtful questions from unprepared undergraduate students. Beresford (2012) argues that the growing interest in service user involvement and the rising demand for it can be linked to a general shift from representative to participative democracy.

## 2. Terminology

While terminology is a major issue in most social sciences, it is especially crucial in work concerning service user involvement. Beresford (2012) states that the main problems in user involvement and participation terminology are poor definition and careless use. The issue is especially problematic because people who are described by these terms can easily feel labelled and hurt. The term *user* has been widely discussed already (e.g. Lechner, 2010; Beresford, 2012), for its passive connotation and the association with illegal

drug use, for example (Beresford, 2012). Beresford (2012, p. 28) further cites *Shaping our lives*, which states that the term *service user* overemphasizes the connection to social services and reduces the identity of a person to this single aspect of their life. Despite all criticism and counter-propositions, it is still the most commonly used term. While most academics defend the use of this term due to its frequency and popularity, the author argues that this approach is to be seen very critically. Social work cannot continue to use badly matching terms just because everyone else does. Therefore *service user* is still the preferred term for this article. It has to be considered that *user* also has an active and emancipated component – someone who is not only in contact with services, but makes active use of them, uses them wisely, makes them be useful (Lechner, 2010).

### 3. Current literature and application

Most literature on service user involvement in teaching and training concerns the health sector (Rhodes, 2012), with a focus on mental health (e.g. Higgins et al., 2010), but also the amount and quality of contributions on service user involvement in social work education is growing (e.g. Robinson & Webber, 2013). Most scholars agree that service user involvement in social work education is beneficial, but there are no consistent findings on who benefits most, to which degree and what kind of involvement is most beneficial nor whether service user involvement actually improves the quality of social work education.

Despite the existence of general guidelines and good practice guides, the actual implementation of service user involvement still greatly varies in quality, quantity and fields of application (Higgins et al., 2011). Research shows that the main fields where service users are actually involved are teaching (Higgins et al., 2011) and the selection of students for qualifying programmes (Robinson & Webber, 2013). Little or no involvement, despite the requirements of the Health Department, is found in other areas, such as

curriculum development and student assessment (Robinson & Webber, 2013; Branfield et al., 2007).

Robinson and Webber (2013, p. 935) identify the two most common models of involvement:

- Empowerment and partnership models
- Outcome focused models

Empowerment models focus on the positive effects of meaningful involvement on service users, while outcome focused models stress the aim to improve the quality of social work teaching and, thus, of the performance of future practitioners. The same kind of distinction can be found in the upcoming section and will be examined later.

### 3.1 Purpose and validation

There are two main schools of thought in the literature: One states that there is insufficient proof of service user involvement improving the quality of social work education (Rhodes, 2012; Robinson & Webber, 2013), while others are convinced it adds unique value for both students and service users (e.g. Branfield et al., 2007).

Different researchers have found that there is little empirical evidence to prove that service user involvement improves the quality of social work education at all (Robinson & Webber, 2013; Rhodes, 2012). The sample sizes in current research are too small (Rhodes, 2012) to actually deduce valid theory from it. There is criticism also from service user groups, who perceive their own involvement as unproductive and tokenistic (Campbell, 1996, cited in Duffy, 2006, p. 17). One participant in a research project conducted by Webber and Robinson suggests that service user involvement in (post-qualifying) social work teaching does not empower service users, it rather disempowers the social workers and devalues the teaching programme (2012). In contrast, Duffy states in his *Good Practice Guideline* that “The

inclusion of users and carers has an invaluable contribution and benefit for social work training" (2006, p. 7).

At this point, the distinction between empowerment models and outcome focused models of involvement can be outlined again. Beresford (1996) distinguishes between a *consumerist approach* that aims at improving the services delivered by social workers (outcome) and a *democratic approach*, aiming at self-advocacy. Current literature suggests that researchers focusing on the empowerment of service users through their involvement in social work teaching seem to be quite satisfied with today's state of the art. Outcome focused research, however, has not been able to deliver sufficient evidence yet. Though the distinction between the two models is valid, the validation and evaluation of the meaning of service user involvement should not be based exclusively on either of them. In order to actually evaluate the success of service user involvement, both intrinsic (for the service users involved) and extrinsic (for the students, lecturers, practitioners and other service users) outcomes need to be taken into account.

It is obvious that service user involvement in all stages of social work education should not only be a standard because it is required (in the UK) by the Department of Health (2002), but the actual benefit should be documented. In order to successfully shift from occasional and tokenistic forms of user involvement, like it was known in earlier years (and still is applied today), there needs to be evidence, or else we simply risk moving back to tokenism – on a larger scale. Research is not needed to prove that service user involvement is a must in social work teaching, but to determine ways, strategies and theories as to how it should be done best in order to have meaningful outcomes for everyone involved.

### 3.2 Obstacles

One major obstacle identified by a number of studies (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Duffy, 2006) is insufficient funding, as is often the case in the field of social work. Duffy's research from 2006 "calls for the absolute need for service users and carers to be properly remunerated for their time, expertise

and expenses incurred as citizen trainers in social work education” (p. 59). An increase in funding for service user involvement is still not included in Croisdale-Appbleby’s five funding conclusions for social work education (2014, p. 84).

Another reoccurring topic is the involvement of so-called *hard-to-reach* minority groups (Byers, 2004). *The groups which* are considered hard-to-reach varies from area to area, but the risk of single user groups being under-represented in social work education is apparent.

Branfield et al. (2007) have identified a list of “barriers to effective involvement” reported by service users. Many of these barriers can be ascribed to the apparent lack of adaption of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to the new standards. The infrastructure is not fully meeting the needs, accessibility is not granted and the university culture and academics’ mindset need to change. In fact, the service users observe that their knowledge and contribution is not valued highly enough by academics.

#### 4. Implications for further research

Most authors criticize the lack of empiric data on the actual benefits of service user involvement in social work education and its effects on practitioners’ performance. Rhodes (2012) identifies “a need for developed and evaluated theories of user involvement” and argues that “without further empirical work, and development of theory, it would be assumptive, at this point, to state that user involvement in health and social care education is desirable, needed or indeed effective” (p. 188). She does not specify whether or not this also applies to social work education, but there is indeed little data on the actual impact service user involvement has on the experience of both practitioners and service users. According to Webber and Robinson (2011), there is a need to define the objectives and evaluate the outcomes in order to verify the impact of service user involvement on social work education. Robinson and Webber (2013) call for evidence-based

research and long-term studies on the performance of practitioners that have been educated with the involvement of service users.

#### 4.1.1 Focus on both empowerment and outcome

Both process (empowerment) and outcome (performance) are central to social work. Social work education is not successful if only one of these criteria is met. The empowerment of service users does not justify any degradation of the social work training provided, and good outcomes for future practitioners do not justify the exclusion of service users from social work education. The two of them go hand in hand and reinforce each other, so they should both be considered equally in research. Empowerment of service users needs to be valued as an outcome.

#### 4.1.2 Service user involvement in research

Though research findings can be important without the active involvement of service users, service user led or participative research adds meaningful value to both the process and the outcome. I suggest that *experts by experience* might have a different approach to research and can add important inputs to the process. Fleischmann (2010, as cited in Webber & Robinson, 2012) argues that meaningful influence can be reached in the absence of full control, but academics need to over-think the still present devaluation of user-led research. Kirby, Greaves and Reid (2010) connect the concept of power (and control is most certainly a sort of power) to knowledge. Involving service users in collaborative research allows them to contribute to the creation of knowledge, handing power over to them.

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