

The impact of Action Learning Sets on the professional formation of youth work students

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Abstract: The authors explore using Action Learning Sets with students undertaking a professional qualification in youth work, and ask whether Action Learning Sets are effective as a pedagogical tool for developing personal and professional skills for youth work practice and in what ways. Youth work and professional training in the UK is contextualised and the approach and use of Action Learning Sets is examined. This paper provides examples of students' personal and professional development, and their ability to relate academic knowledge to practice situations as a result of undertaking Action Learning Sets. It also outlines positive organisational outcomes and considers barriers to students' professional development due to organisational change and professional uncertainty, concluding that students consider action learning to make a positive contribution to their professional development.

Keywords: action learning sets, youth work, professional development, reflective practice

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Introduction

It was becoming increasingly apparent to us that students on our professionally qualifying youth work programme were struggling to apply taught youth work theory to practice placement settings. In response, the authors were instrumental in the development and facilitation of an Action Learning Set module to provide a classroom based opportunity to help students reflect and apply their theoretical knowledge in the context of their placement. The Module aims to create an environment where students can explore and understand practice related issues through dialogue and critical reflection aided by other trainee professionals (McGill and Brockbank, 2004). We have been delivering this for over ten years mainly due to positive evaluations year on year. However, we have never until now, fully investigated its potential for professional learning within the classroom. This paper explores the link between professionalization and action learning, discusses our approach to action learning and the benefits of using this approach to professional development. It analyses student experiences of undertaking this module using data collected from three cohorts of students. It explores the immediate issues and benefits to student professionalization and the longer term impact this approach has on student professional development within the current contextual professional climate. It asks what aspects of professional competency can be developed using this method and whether students can articulate this learning.

Professional development and Action Learning Sets

The professional formation of students on undergraduate programmes is the process by which students acquire the knowledge, skills and values that are associated with professional identity. It is hoped that students graduating from such programmes are able to deal with a variety of different situations by reflecting, evaluating and choosing professionally developed responses (Lizzo and Wilson, 2004).

In the UK, youth work is a recognised graduate profession, with its own professional competencies, delivered by universities and validated by its professional body, the National Youth Agency. As well as university academic undergraduate requirements, student youth workers also have to

undertake and pass 800 hours of assessed practice based on youth work national occupational standards

Youth work refers to 'youth' being generally between the ages of 13 and 19 and the 'work' being the voluntary engagement of young people in activities and opportunities that stretch their horizons and help them learn about themselves, others and society (Young, 2006). Its purpose is to build relationships with young people, developing physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects linked to their well-being. It has a deliberate educational approach, with its own pedagogy, using informal educational methods through activities and dialogue (Sapin, 2012). This educative process extends and deepens a young person's understanding of themselves, their community and the world in which they live and supports them to proactively bring about positive changes. This inherent commitment to tackling social injustice and an emphasis on relationships that promote and develop young people's voices, provide its value base and professional identity (Sercombe, 2010). This is akin to Canadian, Australian, American and New Zealand approaches, whereas in Continental Europe youth work has a socio-cultural function and is linked to social work and social pedagogic training. The landscape for youth work jobs in the UK is changing due to government spending cuts; students are no longer entering the well-defined arena of state funded youth work and are often in contexts managed by those with different professional values and identities. It is therefore even more important that youth work graduates exit the course with the ability to apply theory and skills linked to their professional identity to an increasing variety of contexts due to a constantly changing working environment. Billet (2004) argues that human agency and the ability to cope with change is vital in professional formation.

The literature on Action Learning Sets as a method for developing professional practice is recognisable within an academic community producing comprehensive texts relating specifically to managing. (Revans, 1982; Pedler, 1997, 2011; Marquerdt, 2012; McGill and Brockbank, 2004; McGill and Beaty, 1993). There was no directly related research to youth work that we found, but a growing body of research interest in this pedagogy for health, education and social work professionals and managers from which we draw some parallels.

Action Learning Sets were pioneered in the 1940s by Reg Revans (Boshyk and Dilworth, 2010) who concluded that managers learn better from sharing their problems than from experts presenting theories. Action Learning Sets involve working in small groups and sharing real concerns,

developing empathy and reflective questions to enable problem solving. The main pedagogical approach is from a constructivist perspective as the principles of action learning include valuing and sharing experience, reflection, collaboration and creating learning (Freire, 1993).

As one key purpose of Action Learning Sets is to increase the ability of those involved to reflect deeply, to begin to see different perspectives and to problem solve, it can be argued that the process is akin to the process of professionalization.

Fuller and Unwin show that 'participation in communities of practice inside and outside the workplace is expansive for professional learning' (2004, pp.134).

McGill and Brockbank (2004) explore the links between action learning and reflective learning which is crucial to achieving good quality professional practice. They refer to Schon's (1987) concepts of 'reflection-in-action' (reflecting on the practice as it happens) and 'reflection-on-action' (reflecting on the practice after it has happened) to identify tacit knowledge which professionals need alongside propositional knowledge. Taught theory (propositional knowledge) becomes meaningful when it is applied in practice and the unconscious practice (tacit knowledge) becomes knowledge-in-use when it can be described. This enables students then to articulate professional behaviour and they argue is a key function of Action Learning Sets (McGill and Brockbank, 2004).

Action Learning Sets as a pedagogical tool has also been linked to the concept of transformational learning (Meizro, 1978). Students are helped to explore the self in relation to current knowledge and values and by being part of a Set are potentially introduced to different perspectives which can lead to greater insight and paradigm shift. As the Action Learning Set process also encourages the development of connected knowing it could be argued that it develops the skills of empathy needed for people professions (Egan, 2014).

Action Learning Set pedagogy and the outcomes of a professional programme are synchronised in so much as they aim to develop critical reflection and decision making based on purposeful and deliberate actions that are underpinned by skill, knowledge values and principles associated with profession identity.

How we have developed Action Learning Sets

In small groups final year students come together weekly over a term, with the express purpose of exploring youth work contexts and practice. The deliberate focus on final year students recognises the managerial nature of their third placement and assumes prior work experience and developed theoretical knowledge. Students are each asked to provide a case study (emailed to the group in advance) that is a concern or one requiring action. So each time a Set meets, a student acts as a Presenter sharing and exploring with the group their issue. It is explained to students that they are seen as the main driver of their learning and when presenting they have to choose their subject matter from current issues or dilemmas they are experiencing. This approach is taken to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to learn from their chosen subject being examined with their peers. The topics tend to focus on change, cultural practices, values, relationships, work demands and assertion skills as a student.

As Set members, students are expected to play the role of critical friend, learning to facilitate peer learning by asking insightful reflective questions that enable the Presenter to discover more about their subject, their context and themselves and through this process identify potential actions/strategies. Set members need to be able to develop their abilities as critical thinkers transcending their own knowledge and experience, not providing answers but learning to ask open and challenging questions. They are not seeking solutions but framing enquiry to enable critical reflection on the part of the Presenter.

Students take turns as the Facilitator following coaching in this role. They are tasked to ensure an environment that is conducive to learning, to monitor the time, and the style of questioning. They are supported by a University tutor, very experienced in Set facilitation, who is always in attendance and who initially would model appropriate questions and intervene if necessary.

Each Set runs a minimum of 8 times to enable students to take part in all the key roles. After the Set students identify and reflect on their learning experienced through this process and action plan for future Sets. So engagement in giving and receiving feedback is crucial. As the term progresses the Sets become more skilled. There is recognition that initially students try to problem solve and use solution focused questions, hence a couple of practice runs. The purpose is to enable the Presenter to arrive at their own solution. Often recognition of the 'real' issue is

enough and the focus is on asking empathetic and deep questions to enable understanding rather than to arrive at a solution, emphasis on process not end result.

Data sources

The authors have taken a qualitative approach to the research, seeking information based on the students' perceptions of their learning through this process.

This is a small scale study that cannot be generalised across all vocational experiences that offers an insight into students' experiences. The methods chosen for data collection are mixed, analysis of written work for breadth and focus groups and interviews for depth. '... a way of analysing the breadth of responses to be able then to investigate in more depth to gain greater understanding and insight' (Taskhorri and Teedie, 2008 in Bergman, 2008, pp.103-105).

The research approach was sequential as themes from the first set of data (the written work) was explored in more depth in focus groups and then interviews, hence developing the main instrument in later stages (Creswell and Piano, 2007 in Bergman, 2008, pp.163-165).

Our research began in 2015, capturing data from 2015 graduating students and also from past students now in employment, as we were keen to explore whether there were longer term effects of the Action Learning Set methodology. The data about student learning is drawn from 20 assignments (2013-4 and 2014-5 cohorts), 14 interviews (2012 -13 and 2013-14 cohorts) and two focus groups (2013-4 and 2014-5 cohorts). The research follows ethical guidelines and is validated by the University Ethics Committee. Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. All participants gave their consent for the data to be used for publication and all students were given initial findings to comment on. No amendments were made following consultation and most were unsurprised at the findings.

As we did not want our knowledge of the students to impact on our research, we asked a colleague to randomly select 20 assignments which were anonymously coded and divided between the researchers which seemed pragmatically an easy, unbiased approach to take. The assignments were entitled

‘What have you learned from the action learning process? Critically explore how this learning will impact on you as a professional practitioner’.

The assignments were written after recently engaging with the Sets, enabling us to capture the immediate learning from these written reflections. This gave us insight into students’ views about whether and how this methodology might impact on their professional practice. However, we were aware that the assignments were assessed pieces and therefore could be seen as unreliable if students wrote what they perceived we wanted to read and not what they actually learnt. Therefore we were keen to explore themes from the assignments further by running two in-depth focus groups involving students who had graduated. As we had a relationship already with these graduates and had their trust, we were confident that they would be honest about their learning and potential impact from Action Learning Sets. The focus groups were set up following an email to students from 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts. All students who showed an interest in taking part were involved. Focus group 1 had eight participants and focus group 2 had nine. The focus group was chosen as a dynamic method to foster meaningful dialogue and to probe emergent themes from the assignments for agreement and divergence. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed on the basis of frequency of discussion of themes. We listened carefully for what seemed to be most significant from tone and level of agreement and highlighted any divergence from assignment themes. This data from the focus groups was then used as the basis of the questions for the structured interviews for students who graduated up to two years previously. Students from the 2012-13 cohorts were contacted and asked to participate in the follow-up interviews, 14 volunteered. Interviews were mainly conducted by telephone (10) due to students’ residential locations, though four students worked locally and were able to attend in person. Interviews were automatically transcribed using data devices attached to the phone and in person interviews recorded and transcribed.

Data from the assignments and the focus groups reflected learning that had taken place, during and shortly after the Action Learning Sets, so therefore the analysis was of short and medium term personal and professional development as perceived by the students. In addition they reflected on the potential in developing professional capabilities beyond the classroom. By holding in depth interviews with graduates who had been working in a professional capacity, for at least two years, we would build

on this data and examine whether Action Learning Sets had any impact on their professionalization a couple of years after leaving the programme

Findings and analysis from the data

Assignments

A thematic analysis using open coding was applied; assignments were divided between the researchers, read and colour coded according to aspects of learning. Once this was complete the researchers looked for patterns and relationships to make more general meaning from the data, concentrating on frequency and pulling out learning aspects mentioned in at least 50% of the assignments. From here we grouped the learning aspects into selective codes and developed our themes as below. These themes were used to inform all data sets.

Three key themes (see Figure 1 below) emerged that were concerned with students' own skill development, their learning about themselves and their developing professional identity.

Figure 1. Themes arising from Assignments

Key themes	Aspect	Frequency in assignments
Skills for practice	1 Use of reflective questions and skills in active listening	20
	2 Supervision	19
	3 Client work	18
	4 Importance of empathy	19
	5 Group facilitation skills	17
Self-awareness	1 Critical reflection	20
	2 Learning about self	17
	3 Confidence	17
Professional identity	1 Generic skills: confidence, reflection, problem solving, team work	20
	2 Youth work specific understanding / knowledge	11

Skills for Practice

All assignments highlighted that students learnt skills for active listening and all commented that they thought they could already do this, but struggled when it came to showing these in the Action Learning Sets. As these progressed students gained a real appreciation of the importance of effective active listening skills and were more able to articulate the benefits of asking reflective questions, challenging and supporting appropriately and demonstrating active listening to the Presenter. For example:

A2: I will be more aware not to jump in with solutions, but to show I am actively listening to them and really try and push my clients to establish their own answers by encouraging them to reflect on what they are saying.

A6: I was able to show the Presenter I had connected with their way of thinking by stating what I understood to be their main issues, this seemed to be really powerful and resulted in the Presenter re-evaluating what they were feeling.

A9: in time I found I developed the skill to ask questions that helped me understand the presenter perspective, not what I thought the Presenter should do.

The assignments linked these skills to working directly with clients and for use in staff development and supervision situations.

Skills developed in the role of Facilitator were linked directly in most assignments to practice and group work skills.

A8: As a facilitator, I tried to encourage the quieter set members to have the confidence to participate more and challenge dominant ones, so less dominant members do not suffer in silence. This is something I will use in team meetings and in delivering group work; it made me aware of power dynamics.

Self-awareness

Students commented on how the group dynamic aided their ability to understand issues better. Different focuses and opinions led to reframing and re-evaluating issues from other points of view, leading to changes in views and attitudes. Through learning about themselves in the Action Learning Sets, they were able to see how this can improve their professionalism.

A8: I learnt that I always think people are looking at my faults or failings, I am not sure where this comes from, but being aware of it I can now try and deal with issues more professionally by not taking it all so personally.

A20: the Set used role reversal with me and I suddenly realised my role in the situation and was able to see how my supervisor might not know what I expect from them.

The most surprising theme for most students was the impact of critical reflection on their understanding of themselves when Presenters. The Action Learning Sets that were most effective were those that were not solution focused but enabled the Presenter to critically reflect as a result of powerful questioning. In a number of cases students commented on the fact they had learnt things about themselves that they have previously not been aware of. They discussed the impact of not having colleagues collude with their opinions, as had previously been the case. Through having to answer questions where they were asked to provide evidence, justify, explain and account for their actions, they appreciated the true impact of critical questioning and subsequent reflection.

A17: It was only by experiencing reflective questioning that I was able to see what I could not see staring me in the face before.

A6: It is truly powerful to get that ah ha moment and realise for yourself. I realised the issue was not what I had presented, but one about me, my feelings of not being in control. ... Had I not taken part in ALS I would not ever have been challenged nor learnt to challenge myself.

A7: I went into the ALS with the answer already in my head, so I thought it's a pointless exercise, yet the group delved deeper and it became apparent that there was an underlying issue about power and my feeling of inadequacy, stemming from being in a children's home, that stop me challenging those in authority.

This complex personal awareness is an important aspect of their personal development. Sapin argues that to carry out professional youth work practitioners need to 'locate' the congruence between youth work values and principles and personal standpoints'. Location is all about being clear about your perspectives politically and in terms of aspects of identity such as your sexual orientation, race or class and the impact of these

on your practice. 'Locating oneself' requires an analysis of experiences and understanding of how things work, perhaps in relation to others' perspectives'. (Sapin, 2013, pp.5-6).

Professional identity

The vast majority of students wrote that they gained professional confidence from taking part in Sets, by being supported and encouraged to think assertively and act to resolve the issue, not just sit on it, or shelve it because they were students on placement. Some pragmatically decided the latter was the best course of action, but articulated that once in a more permanent role would be confident to challenge systems and practice.

A4: I don't think I would have believed in myself as a professional, if I had not taken part in action learning, as I discovered I was trying to do something I did not believe in as opposed to proposing a way to change it, all because I lacked the confidence to do so'.

The assignments showed that students experienced through the Sets the roles of learner and educator and could articulate how the learning gained could develop their professional skills and approaches to working with young people. Key messages about self-awareness, critical reflection, self-transformation, professional identity and skill development arose from the assignments. We explored these issues in focus groups and then in the interviews to ascertain whether these were crucial learning points that students took into practice or whether they were only articulated into assignments so students could gain academic grades.

Focus Groups

In each focus group we shared the themes that arose from the assignments and asked students to elaborate on these. The transcriptions that arose from the recordings were annotated for tone of voice, importance placed on an issue and any areas of disagreement and strong agreement. We then looked for patterns across both of the groups.

Skills for practice

The focus groups reaffirmed the skills developed in action learning with regard to questioning and listening. Like the findings from the assignments,

students all commented on how they could link the experiences in the Action Learning Set to practice, especially group facilitation and communication skills. They attributed these key skill areas directly to taking part in the Action Learning Sets.

SFG1: I feel I did not get these skills from other taught elements of the curriculum.

However both groups became animated and spoke about transformational changes in relation to interventions with young people, particularly that the process had helped them understand the need to convey empathy with young people and never tell the young person what to do. It highlighted the importance for them of starting where the young people are and helping them develop for themselves.

SFG2: the key being the relationship and the outcome being young person focused.

This was taught and rehearsed within placement modules within the curriculum, however it was not until they experienced being a Presenter within the Action Learning Set module themselves that they 'got it'.

A powerful learning experience agreed by all in both groups was the realisation that aspects identified by Set members about a Presenter's story were not being recognised by that Presenter (whether they are factual or perceptual). They began to realise (not necessarily explicitly) that their own solutions made no sense to the Presenter and other approaches may be more helpful to them. They were able to articulate how this had directly impacted on practice.

SFG2: Doing ALS helped me understand I help more by asking purposeful questions, this was a turning point as I learnt how to work with young people without feeling guilty that I was not doing or fixing something for them.

SFG1: The benefit of using questioning techniques and challenging without confronting also gives confidence to be assertive in a nice way, especially in supervision.

In the assignments, the group dynamic was focused on students' ability to facilitate a group that would be helpful in practice. Whilst the focus groups also mentioned this as a useful skill, they felt that it was more important to recognise the power of the Set and hence the 'group' in aiding critical reflection and providing different perspectives.

SFG1: it increased perception.

SFG2: suggested 'that values were driving questions and values were different and that it helped to value difference.

Self-Awareness

Within the assignments the students were writing about their ability to be clearer on issues, see things more broadly and to value questions that helped them reflect on themselves. An issue that did not arise in the assignments but was discussed in great detail in both the focus groups was that students reflected on the discomfort they felt taking part in the process. Some found the process intrusive, and struggled with revealing feelings and being vulnerable. However there was agreement that they gained more after the Action Learning Sets, having time to absorb and reflect on the process. There was unanimous agreement from both focus groups, that the experience started a reaction that led to later reflection, and that by reflecting members realised they had a responsibility to enable things to happen, even to take action. This change related to themselves and also to their practice.

SFG2: It provoked some thoughts that only really challenged me later, this impacted on my practice and changed the way I related to my colleague.

SFG1: I realised that I didn't like being criticised and blamed others without thinking that I can learn from this.

Professional Identity

Students wrote about feeling increasingly confident through the support they received from their peers in the Action Learning Sets. The focus groups strongly agreed that this was their experience also. Many attributed this to not feeling alone and being challenged in a comfortable learning environment (SFG1: 6 out of 8 students, SFG2: 9 out of 9 students). This helped the majority of them to understand and articulate interventions and professional identity.

SFG1: I was able to state why I was using informal methods and that my link teacher began to understand our roles were different and let me have a go at doing it my way.

Students in both the focus groups had an interest in discussing youth work specific professional identity, whereas the assignments concentrated on more generic professional skills. Some discussed feeling isolated professionally and not being understood in their workplace; others felt accepted and that their unique skill set was valued, enabling them to develop. Organisational culture was mentioned as a key factor with regard to how much autonomy youth workers felt they actually had. In both groups there was agreement that professional identity grows the more workers are given the responsibility to make decisions. Both groups agreed the Action Learning Set process (with hindsight) helped them articulate their approach and see how theory, practice and professional values were paramount in making and taking decisions.

SFG1: but if they are just a tick box and not in the interests of young people, you have a duty to advocate, I learnt I am colluding if I don't say anything. I learnt this directly from my Set experience.

Interestingly, a similar debate took place in SFG2.

SFG2: you start with rules etc and these help but the more you grow with reflection the more critical and independent you can be from them and as long as you can justify your decision ethically and work with youth work values - action learning started this process'

This correlates with Sercombe (2010) who argues that a profession is defined by the nature of the relationship the professional has with the people they serve. Youth workers are working with a group whose voice is not often heard in society. They need to be able to work ethically and effectively enabling young people to increase control over their lives as they become adults.

Focus group members also felt more able to challenge or make decisions as a paid worker as opposed to a student on placement.

The focus groups had concurred with the assignment data that professional skills, application of theory to practice, confidence through group support and critical reflection had been learnt in the module and developed in practice afterwards. The main differences arising from the focus groups were around recognition, articulation and acceptance of professional identity within different organisational contexts which would be explored further in the interviews.

Interviews

As it was at least two years since the students undertaking the interviews had graduated we were interested in what the students could remember of the Action Learning Set module and if there was any learning that they could directly attribute to this module that they have taken into practice.

The 14 participants who volunteered to take part in in-depth structured interviews were all in graduate level jobs, five of them in traditional youth work roles. There were nine working in other contexts with young people and communities, three in a school environment, two with troubled families and four within the voluntary sector (on employability, youth volunteering and community health programmes). This provided a rich data set for analysis. Interviews were structured using the themes as above with greater emphasis on professional identity as highlighted in the focus groups. The data was then analysed based on frequency and significance noting similarity and differences to existing data.

All students interviewed recalled their Action Learning Set experiences. One past student commenting:

Gi7: It was the glue module; we had to justify our thoughts in relation to theory which we pulled from other modules, so it made sense when we were the Presenter.

Skills for practice

The interview data concurred with focus group and assignment findings that there was significant skill based learning gained from the Set in relation to questioning for empathetic understanding, and that this was developed and directly transferable into their work. The majority (13/14) used techniques learnt during the Set process with young people.

When asked what was the greatest impact of the Set process most (11/14) of the students believed it was developing reflective questioning techniques that allowed young people to arrive at their own decisions and empowered them to achieve any associated actions. This they believed was more sustainable than to advise young people about what is best for them.

Gi2: it changed my perspective of youth work – it isn't about resolving issues and throwing solutions at them, it's about teaching them transferable skills so that they are self-sufficient.

Gi7: We had to show empathy and reflective listening as a member within a group,

which was not easy as I wanted to tell them how to sort it. But I learnt my way isn't always the only way and as the facilitator I really understood the impact of different perspectives. I use all these skills now with young people but also when helping colleagues learn.

However dissenters argued that it was easier sometimes just to sort things for young people, especially if they were working to outcomes and were time limited. (3/14)

Many raised the issue that momentum started with the Action Learning Set module was lost because of a lack of time in work for critical reflection (6), or limited supervision (9). In addition, these students also spoke about their dissatisfaction with the supervision they received.

Gi11: .which at best was a cosy chat or at worst a tick box of what I had or had not done.

Some were able to challenge poor supervision and one graduate stated

Gi9: I am able to change things by learning how to challenge effectively, e.g. I wanted to learn from supervision, so I explained how it can work better for me. My line manager now works with that.

This student commented that this was attributable to the Set process directly as her issue was about being more assertive, 'the learning will be with me for life' (Gi9).

Six graduates were also line managers and all said that they used skills of reflective questioning in their supervision sessions to develop reflective and problem solving skills with their supervisees. This was something all attributed to the learning from the Action Learning Set module.

Self-awareness

Significant learning about themselves during Sets and the impact this had on graduates' understanding and decision making was discussed in all interviews. This was attributed to having to present an issue and being helped to interrogate the issue. What they thought was their dilemma in many cases turned out not to be the issue; this was transformational in terms of self-discovery (10/14).

All students were able to see the benefits of continuous reflection and perspective making when analysing their responses at work. They attributed

this directly to their experiences undertaking Action Learning Sets and being supported and challenged by peers in a safe environment. Some were helped to see that dilemmas and issues were not just their responsibility, by drawing on structural and organisational wide explanations for what is often presented as an individual or personal relationship issue (7/14).

Interestingly no student interviewed could say how they have been helped at work to analyse dilemmas in this way again. Many regularly reflected themselves (8/14) and some were helped to reflect in supervision (6/14) but none experienced Action Learning Sets again after leaving University.

Gi10: Time and again I wanted to bring people together to see their take on issues, but to be seen to spend time working on stuff together is a luxury management say we cannot afford.

Literature suggests the opposite and that time spent in learning within the group dynamic can stimulate the creativity of constructive knowledge. And participation in the process of learning leads to connected knowing and perspective making built from a variety of different experiences (McGill and Brockbank, 2004, p.21).

Professional identity

Students articulated (9/14) that they had gained professional confidence as a direct result of being supported and challenged in the Sets. When probed some attributed this (5/9) to other students in the Sets encouraging them to believe in themselves. More students however (6/9) said this confidence was reducing the longer they were in work. This was dependent on the context in which they worked (4) and the importance given to supervision (5) or line manager understanding what youth workers can contribute (3).

Gi11: staff just don't get youth work, they don't reflect and don't understand why I want to spend time talking, I am often told to just get on with it, I am starting to question it myself now.

Gi7: it was soul destroying trying to explain how I saw things differently and asking whether we could try it my way, In the end I just gave up for an easier life.

This indicates a difference between youth work contexts where youth

work values are understood or valued and practiced and other contexts where they are not, which aligns with the findings in the focus groups.

Gi5: it's important to offer other perspectives on the issues, if there is to be any change or challenge to thinking, we are encouraged to do this as we are from diverse disciplines.

Discussion

Students responses show how they have 'changed' as a result of taking part in Action Learning Sets, either by gaining different perspectives or because of increased self-awareness. Many students articulated that it helps them understand their role by drawing their learning together from other modules and applying it to practice, that it prepares them more than any other module for professional life. Whilst we anticipated students would be helped to reflect, we underestimated the importance of the module in bringing everything together as a whole and helping them make sense of the component parts of the programme. This was directly linked to being asked questions of peers in relation to professional identity and values and having to justify through critical reflection the application of theory. There are no other modules where they are asked to verbalise in the moment theoretical approaches or have to justify their rationale to peers.

Most students discussed the importance of critical reflection and its impact on their self-awareness. For some this facilitated transformative learning that enabled them to substantially change their frame of reference about themselves and their role. This concurred with Ajoku's (2015) findings of the transformational nature of ALS with her business undergraduates especially in relationship to organisational transformation. Most of the learning arose from support, critical feedback, reflection on learning and a learning environment that was conducive to this.

Being challenged via peer intervention helped students recognise what they are aiming for in their work as informal educators and gave them confidence to articulate this in the workplace.

Students were able to discuss the transferability to the workplace of effective communication skills developed in Action Learning Sets and their increased confidence in their understanding of their professional identity. Students articulated the importance of empathetic understanding and

empowering the Presenter to solve the issue themselves. This impacted in a fundamental way on how they worked professionally in their relationships with young people and colleagues. It also agrees with research by Ruth King (2016) reflecting on learning as a newly qualified social worker and Action Learning Set Facilitator.

The Set process appears especially important where it has helped students develop confidence in their professional identity and in their ability to stand up for this and articulate professional values in changing organisational contexts. Similar findings to Burgess (1999) whose study showed social work managers' improved ability to manage contradictions and changing environments as a result of Action Learning Set involvement.

However some participants discussed how an organisational culture that is not based on critically reflecting or even discussing professional approaches has impacted negatively on them as developing youth work professionals. This echoes Stark's (2006) similar findings from research on the impact of Sets used with nurses and educators in organisations where the culture discouraged innovative problem solving in favour of maintaining the status quo.

Graduates commented that there was limited supervision in the workplace and no mechanism for group reflective learning so individuals were left to self-reflect without the benefit of alternative perspectives and challenges which they had come to value as a result of taking part within the Sets during their studies. However the learning from the Sets has developed their inner supervisory skills that enable them to critically evaluate the practice and the organisation even if they were powerless to implement change.

It appears that the use of Action Learning Sets as a pedagogical tool does indeed develop learning and professional capabilities. As we could not find other studies at the time of writing directly linking Action Learning Set methodologies to undergraduate professional programmes, we cannot make a comparative analysis. However, our research suggests that programmes in which enabling relationships are important, or programmes that include an assessed work-related element where the application of theory to practice is vital, could benefit from this form of pedagogy. It is therefore an approach that is worthy of development elsewhere in Higher Education professional programmes.

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