

# ‘Teaching Hope’: Advocacy themes as a tool for learning and practice

Jessica Proctor<sup>1</sup>

**Summary:** This article provides a brief analysis and evaluation of a one-off cross-placement student group based around the theme ‘advocacy’, and presents the views of both the facilitator and the students who took part. It asks the questions: ‘Are cross-setting student groups useful in terms of development of reflective capacity in social work students?’ ‘Do themes from advocacy provide a good starting place for the discussion of social work values?’ and ‘Can advocacy principles be applied across social work settings, and what are the potential benefits and obstacles?’. Some conclusions and recommendations are offered.

**Keywords:** Social work values; managerialism; student groups; development of reflective practice; advocacy; professional identity

1. Independent Practice Teacher

**Address for correspondence:** 1/2 Sunnybank, Lower London Road, Edinburgh, EH7 5TL. best.foot.forward@hotmail.co.uk

**Date of publication:** 29th December 2011

## Background

While practice teaching for a number of students in a variety of settings, I became aware that I was hearing similar themes in their more thoughtful questioning about the tension between the genuine desire to work with, observe, assess, plan and recommend courses of action in partnership with and to the benefit of the service-user (a theme embedded in the Standards in Social Work Education (2003)), and both internal and external – systematic, inherent and implied – obstacles to doing so.

I identified a theme of ‘managerialist’, functional perspectives whereby planning and assessments were led by concerns about control of and access to limited resources, rather than by the needs or best interests of individual service-users. This approach was felt by the students to be embedded in social work practice as they were experiencing it and to be restrictive and, at times, actively discouraging of creative thinking, idea sharing, collaboration and open questioning, an observation that is supported by much of the recent literature about the impact of neo-liberal, market-based approaches on social service planning and delivery (e.g. Healy, 2002; McBeath and Webb, 2002; Ming-sum Tsui and Cheung, 2004; Heffernan, 2006; Ferguson, 2007; Standford, 2008; McDonald et al, 2008; Aronson and Smith 2011).

This effect was especially highlighted by McDonald et al (2008) who found that ‘there were barriers to retaining and using professional knowledge arising from the context of service provision at three levels: structural, management and practitioner’ (p. 1374). They found that at the organisational level, inflexible hierarchical structures engendered conflict between services and discouraged use of practitioner knowledge, at the management level, where there had been a shift in supervision towards focusing on workload management, resulting in a disconnect emerging between individuals’ practice choices and their ability to rationalise these within suitable theoretical frameworks and, at the practitioner level, gaps in knowledge predisposed individual workers towards defensive and highly procedural approaches.

Harlow (2003) presents both the historical context and current drivers for an increasingly managerial-technist approach in social work, based on free market principals, and the pressure it exerts on social workers to think and question less, follow instructions and complete forms more. Ming-sun tsui and Cheung (2004) illuminate the shift in

focus that managerialism represents: from service-users to customers; from staff as professionals to staff as tools/employees; from effectiveness to efficiency as the most important measure of social care practice, and state that

management, after all, is a means not an end. To elevate management to the level of an 'ism' is to give it a comprehensive power that is beyond its appropriate function... (p. 441)

While all three students were encountering and reflecting on these same themes, it became apparent that there was a difference in attitude between the two students based in a statutory community care agency and the one student based in an Independent Advocacy agency, within which the sole and un-obscured aim was to form partnerships with individuals to help them participate as fully as possible in all decisions and assessments involving their care, their lives, their families and their life opportunities. While all three had encountered obstacles and challenges to the idea that social work is a role and a profession based in citizenship and inclusion, individualisation, anti-oppression and 'least interference', the student in the advocacy agency appeared to be empowered by his role and task to actively challenge these obstacles while the students in the statutory agency seemed worried about their own and others' capacity to maintain this bedrock of values in practice over time, set against systems which appeared to be becoming ever-more automatic, simplified, streamlined, impersonal, risk-averse and unimaginative.

This is especially concerning in relation to the development of students' reflective and critical capacities while undertaking their training. Students are encouraged to question systems and approaches universally in order to structure and build upon a unique professional identity (Cree and Meyers, 2008). In some cases, with the current and increasing focus on business models within social work processes and assessments, it appears that qualified professionals are having to undertake 'complex identity work' in order to retain a connection to their value base within their practice (Aronson and Smith, 2011). If this is the case, then what is the cost of a chronic lack of congruence in the working environment, and what is the related cost of this incongruity to those in social work education who are undertaking the complex and demanding task of beginning to identify, define and develop an

autonomous professional identity? The research presented by Aronson and Smith (2010, 2011) suggests that for some managers the cost is variable but includes tiredness, disorientation, internal tensions and heightened uncertainty.

I am concerned that, without support and guidance in sustaining critical awareness, my students' fears that they might not be able to sustain a position of questioning and resistance could be realised.

As an independent practice teacher I have had the opportunity to engage with social work students across a range of statutory and voluntary settings, with varying roles, approaches and remits, which has had a positive influence on my own practice and depth of knowledge. Within each setting I have come across new ideas and witnessed a variety of methods and approaches being employed and reflected upon; this has benefitted my professional development and my personal capacities have increased. I have found, as highlighted by the student experiences and discussions related above, that while the answers might be different in each setting, the fundamental questions that arise are the same.

This varied experience has made me consider whether my students might not also benefit from making links and sharing learning across agency settings, and to consider the possibilities and challenges of facilitating such a process.

I felt that the students I was working with based in two different settings could potentially benefit from sharing their practice experiences in a way that would support and encourage imaginative speculation and critical awareness, as well as possibly contribute to the emergence of practical approaches and inspirations regarding the state of social work thinking and functioning and serve to increase the students' own sense of power within their chosen profession – power to ensure that individuals retain or become entitled to autonomy in their lives, while appropriate systemic support and protection from harm continues to be available when needed. There is also some evidence that students themselves value support and discussion groups as a means of managing and minimising the stress their social work education submits them to (Collins et al, 2009), and I believed the provision of this additional support could help these students consolidate their learning and potentially reduce the tensions generated by on-going learning and critical discussion.

One of the principal aims of the session described below was to

enhance both self and other awareness through the sharing of practice experiences and decision-processes in relation to advocacy themes. Urdang (2010) states that teaching self-reflection as a skill is a central element in helping students in the social services develop a 'centred and stable professional self' (p. 525), and recommends creating and providing unique approaches to the development of self-analytical and self-awareness capabilities.

I asked these three students to participate in a one-off group session based on the idea of 'advocacy', as I felt that the core beliefs, mission statements, training and overall focus of the advocacy agency the one student was working within potentially represented and at least addressed the 'ethical centre' my students were attempting to uphold.

Independent Advocacy, and its largely grass-roots, organic, holistic and continuous attempts to define itself and its task, appears to encompass and encourage the very principles which are being obscured within social service departments (Harlow, 2003; Forbat and Atkinson, 2005). The Principles and Standards in Independent Advocacy Organisation and Groups (2002) include such categories as 'Respect and Decency' and place the relationship between 'partners' e.g. the advocate and the 'people the organisation believes need support' (SIIA 2002) at the centre of practice. In his paper 'What's worth working for?' (1989), O'Brien highlights some of the central precepts of advocacy that appear to me to link directly to the social work values which are made explicit in the Key Principles of the BASW Code of Ethics (2002) and these links are further enhanced by comparing a selection of the guiding principles to be found in both the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance Principles and Standards (2002) (mentioned above) and, most importantly for this paper, in the Standards in Social Work Education (2004). The section below highlights these links:

**O'Brien**

The individual must be welcomed, celebrated and listened to, challenged and supported in every environment to develop every talent that he or she potentially has... his or her contributions must be facilitated and used for the benefit of the wider group

---

**BASW**

Respect for human dignity, and for individual and cultural diversity  
- Respect for human rights and self determination - Partnership and

empowerment with users of services and with carers - Equal treatment without prejudice or discrimination - Enabling people to develop their potential

---

#### **SiSWE**

Working with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to achieve change, promote dignity, realise potential and improve life opportunities - Working with groups to promote choice and independent living - Representing in partnership with, and on behalf of, individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to help them achieve and maintain greater independence

---

#### **SIIA**

Independent advocacy puts the people who use it first - IA is directed by the needs, interests, views and wishes of the people who use it – IA helps people to have control over their lives and to be fully involved in decisions which affect them – IA tries to make sure that people's rights are protected – IA values the people who use it and always treats people with dignity and respect

---

I hoped that sharing learning across social work settings could provide an opportunity to engender discussions of the principles above, as well as generate some creativity in relation to locating, effecting, promoting and applying these principles within social work settings today – to stimulate and foster a sense of hope in students for the future of social work values.

### **Aims of exercise**

- To examine the potential of cross-setting group supervision for enhancing student learning and reflexivity
- To measure the degree to which a statutory social work service is currently embodying advocacy principles, and possible obstacles to this
- To analyse the effectiveness of 'advocacy' as a theme for developing student professional identity and sense of empowerment in practice

## Participation

Two final placement students based in statutory adult services and one final placement student based in an Independent Advocacy voluntary organisation.

The three students taking part in this session were all from the same course; the major links between them were that I was their practice teacher, that they were all working primarily with adults in their placement settings and that they had individually exhibited an interest in or proclivity for non-managerialistic and relationship-based or inclusive approaches.

## Methods

Each student was invited to think about their views on and experience of 'advocacy' in their placement settings and then prepare a case study from their practice experiences that illustrated these views. The students had six weeks in which to reflect and prepare, and then came together to present their case studies and share ideas. Guidance on what to present was intentionally vague in order to maximise creative and original ideas.

Post-session, all three students were asked to comment on their experiences and respond to the following questions:

- Do you think cross-setting student groups are generally a good idea? If so, why?
- Do you think group discussions support/enhance your own reflectivity and reflexivity?
- Did this session, in particular?
- Do you think 'advocacy' is a useful starting point for discussions about social work ethics?

## **Evaluation**

### **Practice Teacher's views**

It appeared to me that a shared topic of interest to focus on and having this task introduced as non-assessed helped the three students to form a coherent and mutually supportive group for the duration and to find similarities in terms of practice and examples of difference which were illuminating.

All three students were able to identify the advocacy role within their work-related tasks though, perhaps not surprisingly, the students based in the statutory service had found it practically more challenging to advocate for the people they were working with than the student in the advocacy agency.

On the other hand, it appeared that the student placed in the advocacy agency had more frequently encountered obvious and impenetrable blocks to his participation in and ability to contribute to decision-making within multi-agency panels, while the students in the statutory service had been able to use their 'allocated' status to make autonomous decisions based in part on advocacy concepts; while they had been asked to justify their positions, they had done so and their decisions usually stood.

While summing up the discussions that had taken place, I reflected that it appeared that while there were significant obstacles to advocacy as a concept, theme and activity within a statutory service, there were also significant opportunities if individual workers had been schooled to look for them and were willing to work hard to perform this role, and the students agreed with this statement. This seemed to me a significant emergent theme, and is echoed by McDonald et al (2008). They found that 'social workers who did not have a good knowledge of the legal mandate for or against intervention and who were not supported by managers able to negotiate with other teams were at risk either of being weaker advocates or of acting oppressively.' (p. 1379).

### **Student views**

I asked the students if they had found the sessions useful, and all three



indicated that they had come away with things to think about and that it had been good to share ideas and challenge some ingrained perceptions.

I asked the students based in statutory services whether or not they would have viewed their practice decisions in light of the concept 'advocacy' if we hadn't specifically drawn out this aspect in this exercise, and one replied that she was quite sure she wouldn't have, as she had found that the agency she was working within, though full of thoughtful and caring practitioners, did not seem to frame their work in these terms either in guidance/literature/training or in practitioners' daily discussions about their social work role and tasks. I felt that this reflection provided some evidence of an increased focus within social service departments on performance, targets and case management (McDonald et al, 2008) and a correlative need to emphasise and focus on the development of critical and reflective abilities in social workers in training.

One student expressed concern over the parameters of Independent Advocacy while still finding the themes useful to the development of autonomous practice.

The student based in the advocacy service was able to provide examples of both 'ideal' partnerships between advocates and statutory social workers and of situations in which individual practitioners actively worked to marginalise advocates in relation to planning, assessment and decision-making panels.

After the session, the students responded to my set questions very thoughtfully and some interesting ideas emerged which I will explicate further in my conclusions. I have set out each question below and indicated agreement/disagreement for all students' responses. I have included one illustrative statement under each question, with the exception of Q4; as the students' responses were all particularly relevant to the ideas presented above, all three have been included.

*Q1 - Do you think cross-setting student groups are generally a good idea? If so, why?*

S1 - Yes, essential. These groups provide an excellent opportunity to take yourself into another practice environment. This can facilitate a process of critical analysis of differing organisational ideologies and how these impact on social work practice.

S2 and S3 – Yes.

*Q2 - Do you think group discussions support/enhance your own reflectivity and reflexivity?*

S2 – I think group discussions help me to reflect on my practice in a different manner or with a different point of view in mind. In doing this I am fundamentally able to improve my practice and build on my social work skills.

S1 and S3 - Yes

*Q3 - Did this session, in particular?*

S1 and S2 – Yes.

S3 – Yes this was a situation that opened this up to the students to take the lead and how far they wanted to discuss their scenarios...in a safe environment.

*Q4 - Do you think 'advocacy' is a useful starting point for discussions about social work ethics?*

S1 - Yes...this representation is at the core of social work, as advocating for and with people recognises that our society is structured in ways which curtails full participation. In this sense advocacy reflects the traditional values base of social work and good practice underpinned by a commitment to social justice and is our point of departure.

S2 – Yes. I think advocacy is a 'hat' that social workers wear and sometimes social workers wear it not through choice but through necessity. Social workers are not always aware of the needs of the client and it is easy to input ones' own values into the situation and advocate on behalf of their client based on what you would want in that situation. Therefore ethically, I think that advocacy is a good starting point for social work ethics.

S3 – I would go further and say that 'Advocacy' is the starting point for true value ethics in social work, this is where social work was born from therefore it is the starting point for any discussion with regards to ethics. Further, one student offered the follow observation:

'(at) the joint supervision session that we had this week I heard (others stating) 'This is what we are allowed to do, however for me to do my job right I had to do this'. It was fantastic to hear this, here are students pushing the boundaries just a little bit at a time to make a significant difference to peoples' lives. I feel confident that there are students out there who will not be downtrodden and beaten by the system.'

## **Analysis and conclusions**

I observed a high degree of fluidity in self-expression in all the students while they were presenting their case studies as well as a lack of unintentional nervous gestures, which seemed to indicate a good level of situational ease.

All three students respectfully and attentively listened to the others and none of them failed to participate in open discussion, which again indicated to me a level of relaxed involvement.

One student stated: 'I thought it was a really good discussion, and I feel more inspired but also more aware of difficulties'.

From examples given by the student based in the advocacy agency of productive multi-agency working and examples given by two of the students of professionals exhibiting negative or dismissive views of advocates' involvement, it appears that individual practitioners within social services and allied professions can have a significant amount of influence over the potential for inter-professional working; in one example, a panel of 'experts' was capable of blocking the citizenship aspect of a decision-making forum by completely dismissing the advocate's suggestions, while there were examples of statutory staff referring individuals directly for independent advocacy in order to counter oppressive practices and supporting this referral by including the advocate in all discussions and openly sharing information. Further, both students based in statutory services provided examples of productive use of advocacy concepts in their own practice, sometimes despite or against systems and sometimes in very simple ways.

In the course of their placement to date (3+ months) the two students based in the statutory service had only had or heard about one encounter with an Independent Advocate within their agency setting.

The above suggests to me:

- That there is potentially a lack of awareness of the availability and utility of Independent Advocates throughout parts of the statutory sector in adult services
- The possibility that, in some cases, greater awareness and understanding of 'advocacy' in general, and of advocacy services specifically, amongst statutory social workers could result in improved inter-professional working and improved anti-oppressive

practice throughout care services

- Advocacy themes are a useful starting place for reflective and ethical discussions in relation to social work practice and for clarifying ideas about individual power and areas for potential influence within a range of social work settings
- There are blocks to the concept of advocacy throughout social work practice, such as time constraints, lack of awareness, the need to weigh risks against individual needs or wants and lack of understanding, as well as limitations on resources
- Equally, there must be other, more internal/personal/emotional, blocks to the ideas of citizenship, personalisation and inclusion – if these could be eliminated, individual social work practitioners have the capacity to directly influence systems and challenge prevailing views, despite limitations and pressures, with or without the involvement of an Independent Advocate. There were examples of advocacy principles being appropriately applied to, for instance, risk assessment processes in non-advocacy agencies from the students' experiences
- There is some current indecision or confusion about the role of social workers in a general way – this is related to the tension between social work tasks, as currently imparted, and social work values as taught
- Cross-setting group sessions can enhance individual students' learning, reflectivity, reflexivity, critical analysis and communication skills and might be a useful 'special educational opportunity' (Urdang, 2010 p. 523) for enhancing students' self-awareness and professional identity
- The opportunity to share practice experiences can increase students' sense of empowerment in relation to their developing social work practice
- Cross-setting group sessions benefit from having a clear focus
- Cross-setting group sessions require a well-placed 'manager', as with the shared practice teacher in this example, or clear communication between professionals in separate but linked agencies to maintain this focus

## **Recommendations**

### **Information Dissemination**

Increasing social workers' awareness of advocacy concepts, as well as of the availability and creativity of existing advocacy agencies, could turn up willing partners within statutory services.

### **Responsibility/Accountability**

Individual practitioners who understand, uphold and reflect in practice the values underpinning advocacy can, individually and collectively, contribute to positive developments in social work practice and thinking: advocacy themes can serve to promote a shift from service-users presenting as 'problems to be fixed' to being viewed as participants in their own care and as experts in their own needs, while not losing sight of broader considerations (e.g. risk/protection).

Individual practitioners sharing these ideas, making autonomous choices about practice and challenging their own approaches and perspectives in practice can help social work as a profession become more balanced, stay creative and continue to develop in a positive way over time. Useful questions for social work practitioners from advocacy themes: Could this situation be improved in any way (even if it seems 'fine')? Does the individual have a choice? Is it okay for an individual to refuse a service or terms of service that don't suit them? What does this service-user know that I don't know? How can I help individuals' expertise be listened to and respected?

### **Education**

Explorations of advocacy as a concept as a part of social work training and further professional development (example, in practice learning qualification modules) could help initiate a shared vocabulary around individualisation, inclusion and citizenship, to the benefit of all services and the enhancement of multi-agency working.

The further development of the group session format as presented

here, by collaborating with other practice teachers and discussing with University course directors, could be of benefit to a larger number of students and combine effectively with course modules to further enhance discussion and learning around values in social work practice, current trends and tensions.

Facilitation and evaluation of further cross-setting group sessions based on perceptions and experiences of advocacy could increase awareness of advocacy concepts, which appears to be a significant factor in these being put into practice across social work agencies. If students and staff are encouraged to consider these ideas, they might be willing, able and enthusiastic about applying them in practice.

## Bibliography

- Aronson, J and Smith, K. (2011) Identity Work and Critical Social Service Management: Balancing on a Tightrope? *British Journal of Social Work*, 41, 3, 432-448
- Aronson, J and Smith, K. (2010) Managing Restructured Social Services: Expanding the Social? *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 2, 530-547
- BASW the College of Social Work. (2002) *Code of Ethics*. Retrieved February 13, 2011, from <http://www.basw.co.uk/about/code-of-ethics/>
- Collins, S., Coffey, M. and Morris, L. (2009) Social Work Students: Stress, Support and Well-Being. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 3, 963-982
- Cree, V. and Myers, S. (2008) *Social Work - Making a Difference*. Bristol: The Policy Press
- Ferguson, I. Increasing User Choice or Privatizing Risk? The Antinomies of Personalization. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 3, 387-403
- Forbat, L. and Atkinson, D. (2005) Advocacy in Practice: The Troubled Position of Advocates in Adult Services. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35, 3, 321-335
- Harlow, E. (2003) New Managerialism, Social Service Departments and Social Work Practice Today. *Practice*, 15, 2, 29-44
- Healy, K. (2002) Managing Human Services in a Market Environment: What Role for Social Workers? *British Journal of Social Work*, 32, 5, 537-540
- Heffernan, K. Social Work, New Public Management and the Language of 'Service User'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 36, 1, 139-147
- McBeath, G. and Webb, S.A. (2002) Virtue Ethics in Social Work: Being Lucky, Realistic and Doing ones Duty. *British Journal of Social Work*, 32, 8, 1015-1036

- McDonald, A, Postle, K and C. Dawson. (2008) Barriers to Retaining and Using Professional Knowledge in Local Authority Social Work Practice with Adults in the UK. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38, 7, 1370-1387
- Ming-sum Tsui and Fernando C.H. Cheung. (2004) Gone with the Wind: The impacts of Managerialism on Human Services. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34, 3, 437-442
- O'Brien, J. (1989) *What's worth working for? Leadership for better quality Human Services*. Lithonia, Georgia: Responsive Systems Associates
- Scottish Government. (2004) *Standards in Social Work Education*. Retrieved February 13, 2011, from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47021/0025613.pdf>
- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance. (2002) Principles and standards in Independent Advocacy Organisations and Groups. Edinburgh, Scotland: Advocacy 2000
- Stanford, S. (2008) Taking a Stand or Playing it Safe?: Resisting the Moral Conservatism of Risk in Social Work Practice. *European Journal of Social Work*, 11, 3, 209-220
- Urdang, E. (2010) Awareness of Self - a Critical Tool. *Social Work Education*, 29, 5, 523-538