

# Involving child protection service users in social work education: A pilot study

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**Abstract:** This paper describes an attempt to incorporate the experiences of service user parents who had been involved in child protection services into the programme at a higher education provider in the London area. The aim was to explore their experiences and their perceptions of what social work contact had been positive or helpful. This is a difficult area of practice due to the sensitive and complex nature of social work intervention and engagement. The service users to participate were identified by a practitioner from the local authority. This paper presents an evaluation of this teaching session, and links this teaching tool with a range of current research in the area. Results showed that students reported benefits from being presented with the lived experience of these users. The links between theory and practice were also enhanced.

Keywords: service user; social work; involvement; education; child protection

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## **Introduction**

this article focuses on two of the key issues, debates and research in this area – firstly, the views of parents involved in child welfare services, and secondly, the role of service user involvement in social work education.

### **Views of parents in child welfare services**

The issue of obtaining the views of parents involved in child welfare services, which incorporates both child protective and wider child welfare involvement, has been explored in a number of studies in the last decade or so. The rationale for obtaining service user viewpoints in the area has been developed so that exploring children's and young people's views has become an important part of research and evaluation. The rise of service user rights in general (Matka, et al., 2009) and children's rights in particular has pushed this agenda forward (Gupta & Blewett, 2008). Indeed the narrative and discourse of children and young people has helped to change and shape services. For example, there appears to be an increasing acceptance of the contribution of care leaver experiences or the role of children's advocacy movement on the provision of care services (Allain, et al., 2011).

In considering the issue of parent participants, engaging with and consulting parents is seen as a central part of the intervention process to maximise children's welfare in general (French, 2007, in Siraj-Blatchford, Clarke & Needham). In fact, the very ideas of partnership are firmly embedded in legislation (The Children Act, 1989/2004), in policy and guidance. Engaging with parents is currently seen as a crucial part of social work assessment and intervention: a theme of the Laming report (2009) '... through a genuine partnership between the social worker and the service user...' (Social Work Task Force, 2009).

There are a number of attempts to ascertain the views of parents involved in services, and a sizeable minority report positive experiences. However, many studies of parents' views revealed themes of overwhelmingly negative experiences of child protective or welfare services. Taking account of the narratives of parents, so that researchers can uncover their experiences and the meanings attached to them reveal issues in relation to power, or lack of power specifically in partnership work (Lonne, et al., 2009; Bundy-Fazioli, et al., 2009); lack of respect perceived; feeling blamed ( Ferguson & O'Reilly, 2001); and cultural issues ignored.

This latter point about cultural issues in child welfare services has been well established for example in studies of the indigenous populations in aboriginal communities or the over-representation of Black and ethnic minority children in the care system (Lonne et al., 2009). Additionally, studies have also found that families involved in the system experienced a lack of help or support due to a risk averse system of safeguarding. The child protection system has been found to operate on a crisis driven rather than a needs-based basis. A study by Hayes and Spratt (2009) highlighted the filtering of need according to risks and priorities. Families generally find that they are the focus of assessment and investigation rather than the provision of much needed timely support (Lonne et al., 2009).

Another issue relates to feelings of grief, in relation to the loss or removal of children, not acknowledged by the system (Lonne et al., 2009). This issue affects future contact with children which is often a key part of a child's care plan. Other studies have highlighted the negative experiences of shock, fear, shame and disempowerment associated with involvement in statutory services (Ferguson & O'Reilly, 2001)

A number of key issues raised in the Munro Review (2011) are reflected in recent literature around engagement with parents. This review encouraged debate among social workers and wider professions over what factors prevent practitioners forming effective relationships with children and families in safeguarding services.

It's all about relationships. . . You have to know someone, trust them. They must be reliable and be there for you if you are going to be able to talk about the things you don't want to.' Parent- Family Perspectives on safeguarding and relationships with children's service. (The Children's Commissioner for England, June 2010 in Munro, 2011)

Various studies have pointed to what families do find helpful in social work contact. Parents identified three key characteristics of workers that they saw as creating a positive relationship in another US study (Bundy-Fazioli et al., 2009): '*a positive disposition, compassion and authenticity*

A study in Northern Ireland again found perceived characteristics of workers to be crucial-in particular, empathy, communication, listening, respect and genuine interest.

... [he is] a good listener ... he takes his time ...

He was very open and honest and he respected our views...I'd no problem -I told him too much... (Spratt & Callan, 2004)

## **Service users in social work education**

The mandate for service user involvement in social work selection and training was established by the department of health standards in 2002 (DoH 2002) and the regulatory body for social work (GSCC, 2005). This movement towards increased service user involvement both in services and in the training of social work practitioners is generally documented as stemming from the consumer rights discourse and lobbying by users representative groups (Matka et al., 2009; Repper & Breeze, 2007). The impetus for the work followed the landmark study and publication by Beresford (1994). Subsequently, service users have been involved in programmes to different levels ranging from involvement in interviewing prospective candidates or in the selection process generally- indeed some level of involvement in this process is a requirement of providers by the GSCC. Commonly, service users are asked to either participate in or deliver teaching sessions where their input is around relating their viewpoint and their experiences (both positive and negative) of contact with social work and wider social care services. There are also a number of other examples of involvement at different 'levels', such as, in the planning and design of the curriculum (Gregor & Smith, 2009) and in the assessment of students, although involvement at this level is less developed nationally (Anghel & Ramon, 2009).

Participation in programmes occurs at more strategic levels in some institutions where service users' representatives are invited to participate in decision-making forums such as programme board meetings (Levin, 2004). Most of this can be seen to be at the lower levels of involvement using a commonly adopted framework such as the ladder of participation (in Longley, 2001). Additionally, there is some concern generally of the representativeness of service users as those most able and perhaps with a voice already come forward to participate (Branfield, 2009). However this broader question can also relate to user groups and movements generally and is not therefore unique to this forum.

Evaluative studies of service user involvement have found a number of positive benefits for both participants and the students on qualifying programmes (Levin, 2004). In particular, the direct involvement in the teaching sessions are shown to have benefits. In terms of service user participants, there are indications that people derive increased self-esteem and confidence at an individual level from participation. In general, the

stigma associated with certain service user groups, particularly in relation to mental health, is shown to be reduced. This occurs to varying degrees, dependant on students' previous experience and can contribute to learning at an individual level. In terms of student learning, studies indicate that the process of involving service users in the teaching sessions promotes increased reflection on practice issues (Branfield, 2009). In terms of skill development, the value of listening is emphasised (Branfield, 2009), both of which have clear links to the skills required by social workers. Overall, it is found that students focus more on the person.

In the very process of involvement, theoretical concepts of partnership and empowerment are demonstrably put into practice. The direct contact, as opposed to reading or case study examples appears to have an impact. The effect on students can be dramatic-in describing the reaction of students to a service user with a sensory impairment: Waterson and Morris note that:

The social and educational impact of the direct contact and relationship with the service user ... cannot be underestimated' (Waterson & Morris, 2005)

### **Issues in considering parent service users**

As outlined above, involvement in social work education is a well-established norm. There have been recent calls to develop user involvement with wider and more diverse groups (Branfield, 2009). In particular, users from in adult services have a much more visible and developed presence in participation and it has been easier to establish in this area than with other groups of users. There has been an expansion of service user involvement to include care leavers, young carers and care experienced users on many programmes reflecting a broader desire to try to include more marginalised and harder to reach groups (Gorin,2008).

In terms of parents involved in child protective/welfare services however, real issues with regards to participation at such a level exist, which practitioners should be keenly aware of as the research on parents' views illustrates, the issues of real partnership and power differentials in practice remain. Of course, this is due to the difficulty of partnership with involuntary service users in this area (Ferguson, 2011). Additionally, educators will want to balance the views of parents' experiences in an attempt to maintain a crucial balance with children rights.

Of course, the major issue in this area is in terms of ethical considerations

– dealing with a very vulnerable group. Recent research around the effects of poverty with a number of vulnerable service users highlighted the very difficult practical and ethical issues that face researchers in this area (Gorin, 2008; Gupta & Blewitt, 2008). Although parent participants may wish to come forward to share their experiences, the possible consequences, in terms of students reactions would need to be considered. Waterson & Morris noted the sensitive nature of the issues and fear of stigma or being judged that would be experienced by many potential users:

Clearly there are significant problems in enabling parents and carers who feel labelled and socially excluded to directly share their experiences and information with professionals in training exercises (Waterson & Morris, 2005)

## **What we did: Methods and participants**

Two researchers undertook the study, one a teaching member of staff on the BA Social Work programmes and the other a Senior Practitioner from children's service in a local authority. Links were already established between the programme and the department in the form of joint planning and contributions to both the curriculum and teaching. The two researchers shared an interest in child welfare based on our previous work experience. We drew on our child protection and practice expertise to plan and carry out the work

Service user participants were approached by the practitioner. The two parents were approached as they had previously been involved in child protective services and their children had been subjects of both children's plans and the child protection case conference system; in this sense the involvement could be viewed as being at the child protection of services. However, care was taken to ensure that the involvement was in the past – it was discussed with the parents to ensure their emotional welfare. One of the key issues that was considered was in relation to anonymity – thus the DVD of the interview was recorded with only the interviewer in view, with both voices recorded.

The researchers ensured informed consent by the use of a consent form which was explained fully to the participants by the researchers. Ethical approval was obtained for the study through the college ethics committee.

The DVD recording was carried out at the college and the benefits of participating and attending this setting was raised by participants. The setting promoted a relaxed atmosphere, as well as lending a sense of the educational context in which the DVD would be shown. Parent participants were reassured that they did not have to tell or retell their 'story' – that a case summary would be outlined to the students who would view the DVD. This drew on the research referred to above and aimed to ensure that the parents were able to give their views in a less emotionally charged conversation, so that they did not become upset or feel judged (Waterson & Morris, 2005). The questions were open-ended designed to focus on the narratives, eliciting the meanings participants attach to their experiences. The questions asked of parents on the DVD recording were open questions about their experiences and feelings around social work involvement. They explained what was or was not helpful and how they would like social workers to be.

An important part of the process before showing the DVD recording was to give a brief introduction and background to the students using a PowerPoint presentation. Preparation of students by a short introduction helped to focus them on the issues and provide a contextual background. A short questionnaire was devised to administer to the group of students to elicit their views. The questionnaire was distributed immediately following the session to maximise the number of responses completed. The questions were devised using a tick box Likert scale response. This was to enable students to complete the evaluation with relative ease, with a section for further comments. The final question was an open question which a number of students filled in, providing suggestions and comments on possible future developments. The questions asked on the written evaluation sheet were as follows:

1. Did you find this useful?
2. Do you think this fits well with current ideas?
3. Would you recommend that this type of input is extended into teaching?
4. Any other comments or suggestions?

## Findings

### Feedback from parent participants

The feedback from parent participants was obtained through an informal conversation following the recorded interviews, from which summary notes were taken by the researchers. As a part of the overall experience, a short period was spent following the session, in order to debrief and give participants a chance to express how the session went from their perspective, in a relaxed informal setting. As referred to above, this also afforded the researchers the opportunity to ensure that any issues in relation to effects of the session could be followed up if required.

There was a great enthusiasm from service user participants and a request from both participants to have further involvement in the future. The experience was a positive one for both the service users and staff members involved. Although feeling apprehensive at first, the participants had felt able to relay their experiences in an honest and open manner. Considering the content of the interviews, in terms of their experiences, the over-riding message about was about being listened to:

*The last social worker was great*

*I liked her she took time to get to know us, you know, really listened...*

*... we got really tired of repeating everything, she never listened*

Another issues raised was around respect and having their own expertise acknowledged:

*one social worker treated us like we were useless parents ... she didn't even have kids*

*she often lied and didn't turn up when she said she would ...*

*... treated us like we had skills and could be good parents...*

The parents valued workers with life experience and who had 'a human' side to the relationship:

*... helps me, she gives me appointments (home visits)*



*...makes me laugh ...*

*...gives me ideas about setting boundaries for the kids...feel more confident*

An issue of communication in terms of shared language was found to be a barrier by the parents :

*...couldn't always understand what he was saying...*

### **Results of student feedback and evaluation**

As outlined above the DVD recording was presented to a group of Intermediate level students on the BA Social Work course at the HE establishment. The results of the questionnaire filled out by the 37 students have been analysed in terms of the responses to the questions with a scale rating and additionally in terms of comments provided and responses to the open question:

The results are shown above in the illustrative pie graphs. It was noted that the vast majority of students (97 %,  $n = 36$ ) responded that they found the session useful, with just one respondent answering 'not really'. Comments that were provided included:

*yes service user feedback is always good as you can learn from any practice mistakes others have made*

*good to get service user feedback on how they like to be treated/approached*

With regard to question two, again a vast majority of students (95%,  $n=35$ ) agreed that the interview material fits well with current ideas, with just two students querying what the current ideas were. Comments from participants included:

*yes links well with values and key roles*

*Yes social work is moving towards working in partnership and sharing knowledge  
This is one way of doing this*

In terms of responses to Question three, it was found from the responses that 100% (N=37) agreed that they would recommend that this type of input is extended into the teaching. Some comments were particularly enthusiastic in favour of this:

*would be great to include this in teaching-gives students an idea of the expectations of service users*

*absolutely, social work students need to be aware how their actions/behaviour and attitude impacts upon the people whose lives they are intervening*

In response to the final question, a number of students provided potentially useful comments and suggestions for extending this piece of work. Some examples of the comments were:

*a good cross-section of service users should be interviewed to ascertain if, for instance, black service users have the same experience as white service users*

*to have the input of children service users too*

*it would also be useful to get the feedback from a social worker...*

*bring service users and those in practice...(to lectures)*

There was a wealth of comments generally about the positive impact of the video, such as:

*I personally have taken a lot in, in that short video clip- not to always presume*

*Highly Recommended*

*... I believe this is a great way to explain the service users experience with social work ...*

*Discussion/implications*

So far as the implications of the results of this piece of research are concerned, the key discussion points attempt to analyse whether and why the attempt to include the voice of service user parents is a positive and beneficial project. Secondly, in terms of student social work education, given the overwhelmingly positive response from this group, what if any are the benefits of including such experiences?

Linking this pilot project to the overall context of service user involvement, as outlined earlier in the background, a number of issues can be expanded. In social work generally, indeed in wider safeguarding/child welfare services, the issue of meaningful engagement with service users and their involvement in services continues (Munro, 2011). Generally, in terms of the meaning of 'engagement,' the concept encompasses 'involvement' of parents in the social work processes which can occur at various stages (Adams, 2012). Ideas of co-operation and participation in decision-making are a central feature of recent policy and legislation as outlined above (Frost & Parton, 2009). There is an expectation that frontline workers have the skills to listen to family members and facilitate them to express their viewpoint. Social care staff are increasingly encouraged to have an ongoing and open dialogue with parents and to engage in the well developed concept of relationship based practice (Ruch, Tunney & Ward, 2010).

The rationale for this increased focus on engagement and participation can be seen at a policy level in terms of improving the outcomes in child welfare cases. As outlined in the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004, parents being involved in meetings, assessments and decisions about their family/children was promoted as good practice in the legislation and guidance. Engagement with users was seen as a tool to be able to carry out a good assessment, for example, in the gathering of information about a child vital to the assessment process (Munro, 2007). At another crucial level, engagement and participation came to be seen as a vital part of building a social work relationship whereby a key aim to facilitate change and enhance the welfare of the family/child. Examples of this, based on a growing body of evidence and linking to the move for linking practice to a clear evidence base, was the use of family group conferences. Research evidence had shown these as an effective practice tool in empowering families to make decisions and draw effectively on wider resources within the family, in many cases reducing the need for state intervention (Marsh & Crowe, 1998). At the other end of the child welfare spectrum, where children have been removed, positive engagement and partnership is seen as essential to promote ongoing contact with looked after children-particularly where the loss of such contact is upsetting and detrimental to children.

The whole area of service user involvement in services on a partnership footing can be a contested area. In general terms there has been criticism from a number of sources of the whole notion of partnership, the rationale that it is based in individual and consumer rights rather than an attempt at ethical practice (Ruch et al., 2010). Others have questioned the very notion

of partnership where such power differentials occur between service users and service providers, echoing Foucault's notions of power perpetuated by social structure and necessitating an analysis of the social and cultural factors that reinforce power differentials (in Hatton, 2008).

In the child protective/welfare arena in particular, this area takes on a particularly problematic dimension. Achieving parental and family engagement in the child protection and welfare arena can be problematic – '*workers struggle daily with this challenge*' (Yatchmenoff, 2005). This is due to factors that are a feature of practice in the area, namely: that the involvement is frequently not voluntary; and the statutory power and duty of the worker and the issues of balancing the conflict between support and control are particular to this field of intervention (Lonne et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2011). From a service user rights perspective, there of course remains a potential conflict between the interests/needs of the child and parents, alongside the general public and media perception of child welfare service. (Lonne et al, 2009). Recent research in the area highlights these issues: a US study of the perceptions of 287 non-voluntary service users found a strong perception that they needed help but many were complying with statutory services without being positively engaged (Yatchmenoff, 2005).

## **Conclusion and future plans**

Thus, the context in which the project was carried out shows the complex issues that surround this area. In general, however, the great benefits of utilising the real lived experience of service users has been highlighted above. It is these well-reported benefits that have led to the development and continuation of these practices on qualifying social work programmes in the UK. The results from the students evaluation of the session we provided echo these benefits- the majority of students reported that they derived great benefits and practice insight as a result of listening to the views of the parent. There was a level of enthusiasm displayed by the students to see this continue on the programme. The overall aim, as with all service user involvement is that the students derive learning which will enhance their practice (Branfield, 2009).

The results of the evaluations appeared to demonstrate that benefits were derived which provided students with an insight and enhanced understanding of the viewpoint of this service user group. The session

was enabled in a positive way, maximising the welfare of the service users. The authors hope that this small scale study has been a step towards good practice for the students involved. It is hoped to incorporate the DVD's into several taught modules and to obtain further, more formalised feedback from the service users involved to utilise in future teaching sessions.

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