

Editorial

The other day I attended an event where there were many service users. I met a particular young lady who introduced herself to me. She was there representing learning disabled people. I noticed she was wearing a medal. I enquired about the medal as I could not recognise it and asked where she got it. She said 'I got it from the queen. I always wear it'. She was so proud of her Member of the British Empire medal (MBE), which she received as recognition in helping the government shape social policy for people with learning difficulties. Having never seen an MBE or been anywhere near one it made me think about the notion of achievement and recognition. How often do we really recognise service user achievement in their helping professionals get it right in delivering better services. Much of this is about how we get service users and carers involved in our work and acknowledge the difference it makes to the outcomes we desire.

In the same way the journal can act as a vehicle to acknowledge achievement in what someone has to say about their work, debate on a subject or research. Here I do not just mean practice teachers, nurses, social workers or academics, I mean service users, students and those practitioners who have no experience of professional journal writing. Given the difficulties involving service users, or for students and busy practitioners finding the time to write for a journal, do we rest on our laurels and placate the research community by providing them with the means to keep their publication rate ticking over? Do we take the risk and open up the journal for a far wider range of authorship perhaps for a service user with something relevant to say about social work education.

If we take the latter option then we travel an unknown road by using an established means of producing knowledge from a not-so established source. Legitimate knowledge worthy of academic and professional peer review and publication derives mainly from established conventions built in research and professional debate, and produced through what the academic community see as acceptable forms of evidence. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

argues for a different type of legitimate knowledge – that produced from the experience and expertise of service users.¹ If we accept this premise then one has to shift paradigms on acceptable forms of presenting knowledge. In that it should be legitimate to present a service user's experience in an article for publication in this journal. Would readers accept this, would academic standards fall, would academics feel the journal loses professional credibility, in particular, in the research community?

My intuition errs on the side of service user inclusion because we have too much to lose by excluding them. I think the journal can support service users, students and others to develop their ideas into writing for the purpose of producing debate and argument, extending knowledge of a particular subject, identifying the evidence base and questioning the status quo. I think this primarily replaces the need for having publications associated to a particular individual. This is not to say that there is no place for researchers who need to publish their thesis, but to gain a balanced approach in reporting the outcomes of research and practice. Hopefully this will develop a journal that maintains academic standards and can be relied on as valid and reliable to researchers, but also becomes a vehicle for other voices. I welcome views on this issue and how others have experienced this dilemma. In the meantime, we are processing our first peer reviewed article written by a service user.

In this edition we have it all, perspectives on individual learning, assessment, international issues, interprofessional practice, religion and spirituality. The first article by Graham Ixer looks at the relationship between reflective practice and social work values. Based on research claims that the way we understand and utilise the notion of reflective practice in social work and health education is fundamentally flawed. There is still insufficient research to make us confident about what it is and how we use it, in particular, in assessment. The author ends the article with a range of principles as guidelines to practice teachers in working with students in this complex area.

The second article is from Debbie Plath and gives an international perspective on practice teaching. Based in Australia, Plath writes about how her university has had to adapt to meet the changing circumstances to which social work education in Australia now finds itself. Practice Teaching is different in Australia to the UK and she uses a practice based approach as a model for practice teaching.

In particular, Plath looks at two specific issues relevant to the UK and I would guess North America, the role of practice teaching in a changing workforce and practice teaching in a global economy. The third article in this edition is from Judith Knight who looks at fieldwork assessment in occupational therapy training. Knight states there is a gap in our understanding about assessment of fieldwork from the experience of the student. This article reports on research carried out by undergraduate occupational therapy (OT) students on their experience of being assessed in practice (fieldwork). This offers a health perspective on the assessment of practice. The paper concludes with a plea for further research on looking at the way OT students are assessed in the field.

The final two articles go hand in hand in offering a thematic approach to different perspectives on the role religion plays in social work education. Given the huge coverage in the national press that religion and religious groups now play in world order and world peace, it is perhaps timely and useful to question the role religion should play in social work and health education. The first of these articles by Sheila Furness reports on a small research study that sought views of students about the impact faith and beliefs have on their social work practice. It explores how a student's personal beliefs are key to their practice but ignored in social work education. It concludes with the need for further research to develop more effective culturally competent practice.

Philip Gilligan explores similar themes to Furness but comes at it from a different point of view and nicely compliments this important debate. He argues insufficient attention is given to helping students explore the potential that religion and beliefs have on their practice. More important practice teachers and educators are ill prepared to help such students. He looks at three issues, which he supports from relevant literature and semi-structured interviews he carried out with practice teachers and students. The need for practice teachers working with children and families to develop adequate knowledge of religion and beliefs; the need for practice teachers and educators to acknowledge the significance of religion on a social work curriculum; and the reluctance of many to ignore the issues surrounding religion.

Note

1 SCIE (2003) *Users at the heart: User participation in the governance and operations of social care regulatory bodies*, Report No 5

SCIE (2004) *Involving service users and carers in social work education*, Resource Guide No 2. March 2004

SCIE (2004) *Has service user participation made a difference to social care services?* Position Paper No.3. March 2004