

Editorial

According to Bell (1973), we have exited the industrial age and become a society in which the production and sharing of information and knowledge has become paramount. While some of Bell's claims might be challenged on theoretical grounds (see, for example, Kumar, 1995), there is little question that knowledge, education and learning are now seen as centrally important to the production of goods and services. It is within this context that social work within the United Kingdom (UK) has developed as a graduate profession, and there has been an increasing emphasis on research and evaluation as a means of improving the quality of practice. Evidence-based practice (EBP) is the order of the day (Taylor and White, 2002), not only in the UK, but in other western countries. Despite this, EBP is contentious: academics have questioned and discussed the principles upon which evidence is generated and the applicability of certain kinds of evidence to practice (see for example, Webb, 2001). Reflecting the current emphasis on stakeholders, debates also revolve around the role of service users in the process of research as well as the consequent development of service provision (see for example, Brown, 2005; McLaughlin, 2006, 2007). The papers published in this issue reflect these themes and trends.

Writing from the Dutch context, Nijnatten argues that social work is a narrative and constructive activity, but this understanding is at odds with its official status. By undertaking a detailed narrative analysis, she goes on to explore the way in which a practitioner manages the tension between the responsibility to demonstrate both care and control when investigating an allegation of child sexual abuse. An indirect approach, with an appreciation of relative rather than absolute truth, is seen as central to the assessment, and Nijnatten emphasises the relational content of the work. This case study is seen by the author as constituting an example of good practice from which learning can occur. In consequence, the paper also reflects the commitment to reflection as a means of practitioner development and organisational change (see Gould and Baldwin, 2004; Martyn, 2000; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). Such an approach contrasts with practice directives and organisational modifications imposed from above on the grounds of external evidence.

Having carried out a three year development and research project in England that aimed to improve standards of service to the D/deaf community, as well as report on the process of change, Young et al. explore three different models of involving service users in the process. The project, which took place in three different geographical locations, was funded by the Department of Health together with the Royal National Institute for Deaf people. A range of factors, including local circumstances, gave rise to the varying models of service user participation. This has led the authors to conclude that there exists a continuum of optimum possibilities.

Thorpe et al. report on an empirical project that explored the introduction of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in one English local authority. Introduced relatively recently, the CAF is a system by which professionals other than social workers (teachers for example) might assess the needs of a child who appears to require welfare support. The intention is to make the best use of trusting relationships that already exist, rather than refer to hard pressed social workers who increasingly concern themselves with only the most severe and entrenched familial problems. The policy also builds on the principle that all professionals should take responsibility for the welfare of children, with the consequent benefit of a seamless service provision. By analysing case files, a research method in which local social workers participated, the authors generated data that could inform a dialogue amongst professionals on the implementation and operation of the assessment system.

Finally, Bilson and Markova report on a small Bulgarian project that evaluated the introduction of community based welfare services that aimed to provide alternatives to the institutional care of children. The evaluation took place in December 2002 and the research team included Roma women. Like many other eastern European countries, Bulgaria is a country in transition. Although standards of living have risen in general, the change towards a capitalist regime has not benefited the population on an equal basis. Many children and their families, particularly those of ethnic minority status (such as Roma people), are socially excluded and living in poverty. In the past, when parents have struggled in such circumstances, the response of the state has been to provide a 'rescue' based solution, and place the children in institutional accommodation. In keeping with the west of Europe, the policy trend is now towards family-based care and the maintenance of blood ties wherever possible. The evaluation concluded that, with the help of the changed benefit system, the project achieved its goal of reducing the number of children living in the orphanage.

The papers in this issue therefore, provide examples of how empirical research, stakeholder participation and professional reflection, offer the possibility of learning and the development of social work practice.

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