

SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: A JUXTAPOSITION OF PRACTICES IN ENGLAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Service user involvement in all aspects of social work education is increasing rapidly in a number of countries worldwide and undergirds principles of social development, a rights-based approach and citizen participation, which are peculiar to social work in South Africa. However, the involvement of service users beyond students' field work, practised as a mandatory requirement in countries such as England, is not common in South African social work education. With the aim to promote local debate on this contemporary global topic, this article embarks on a literature informed juxtaposition of contexts and practices in England and South Africa in order to examine the potential applicability of service user involvement in South African social work education. It is concluded in this article that although the involvement of service users has the potential to bring "real life" into social work education, the involvement of service users without extensive debate and reflection would be ill-considered in the South African context.

Key words: service user involvement; social work education; Higher Education Institutes; principles of social development

INTRODUCTION

South African Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) of social work embarked on a process of self assessment of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) as established by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP, 2009a). In 2009, HEIs providing social work courses had to submit self assessment reports in preparation of a quality assurance audit to a task team appointed by the Professional Board for Social Work, as endorsed by the SACSSP. Feedback by the Registrar of the SACSSP (SACSSP, 2009b) indicated that although extensive understanding of curriculum alignment is demonstrated by the HEIs' submissions to ensure minimum standards and compliance with the BSW, certain gaps remain. The lack of alignment between assessment tasks, associated assessment criteria (AAC) and exit level outcomes (ELOs) posed a specific challenge. The feedback to HEIs suggests that "Assessment tasks should be giving students opportunities to demonstrate in authentic (real life) ways their competence against the AAC and ultimately the minimum standards of the qualification" (SACSSP, 2009b:2). One way of bringing "real life" into social work education as expressed by the SACSSP is to involve service users in the design and delivery of social work degrees as expounded by Levin (2004), albeit within the context of social work education in England. The said author argues that "...the social work degree offers a major opportunity for a new generation of social workers to gain a thorough grounding in service users' and carers' experiences and expectations from the very start of their training and careers" (Levin, 2004:2).

Service user involvement in social work education, for the sake of giving students opportunities to demonstrate their competencies in real life, beyond being merely involved in students' field work, is increasing rapidly in a number of countries worldwide, whether by requirement, principle of good practice or as a challenge for the medical model of social work education (Branfield, 2007). For example, the Australian Association of Social Workers (2008:7) states that "...wherever possible, there should be involvement of clients and service users in the planning and delivery of social work education programmes". Examples of current service user involvement in all aspects of social work education can also be found in Sweden (Wolmesjo, 2008) and Croatia (Urbanc, 2008). One such example of growing interest in holistic service user involvement in social work education is a research project currently being undertaken by a team of researchers in Croatia, Slovenia and Macedonia and which is funded by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (Radović, Urbanc and Delale, 2008). Indeed, this shows that service user involvement in social work education as

a whole is increasingly seen internationally as a tool for democracy, empowerment, accountability and organisational, economic, social and political engagement and participation (Munday, 2007) – all principles undergirding the South African White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) and a social development and rights-based approach advocated through citizen participation, which is peculiar to social work in South Africa (Patel, 2005). These intrinsic principles of service user involvement in all aspects of social work education thus fit comfortably within the South African social development paradigm, and sound a distinct call to debate the practice of service user involvement in South Africa's social work education. However, the involvement of service users, beyond students' field work as practised in countries such as England is not common to social work education in South Africa.

The preceding scenario gives rise to the question on the appropriateness of the involvement of service users within the context of the South African social work education. While England's HEIs in social work must meet the requirements set by their Department of Health and have involved service users in all aspects of social work education since 2002 (Beresford and Croft, 2004), the intention of this article is to juxtapose service user involvement practices in England and South Africa, in order to examine the potential applicability of these English practices in social work education in South Africa. The ultimate aim of this article is therefore to promote local debate on a contemporary global topic by defining service users, describing service user involvement in social work education in England, interpreting the relevant South African context and by examining the congruency of country practices. The article concludes with a postulation on the appropriateness of service user involvement within the context of South African social work education.

Defining service users

The term “service user” is largely defined by its social and historical settings, and therefore also encompasses the political impact inherent in the social work domain. For instance, attempts in England to preserve people's rights and social inclusion, have resulted in the terminology for recipients of services changing from “client”, to “consumer”, to “service user” (Banks, 2006). It is, therefore, imperative to recognise that the very term “user” of services has different connotations for different people. The term “service user” or “user” should thus not be applied interchangeably as it often is, for in many cultures the term “user” may also have many derogatory meanings, i.e. “user of illegal drugs” or someone who borrows money and does not pay it back. Stets and Burke (2000) also highlight the concern that people who

share role expectations may have their behaviour defined by such interactions, thus rather than empowering service users the term may denote increased dependence on services. This raises questions about terminology used in policies, and whether professions and governments' use of terms accurately reflect the preferences of those they are designed to serve. The particular term used for the recipient of services thus indicates the nature of the relationship between the professional social worker and the recipient of services, the type of services the recipient receives, as well as the socialised meaning respective societies ascribe to the term (Branfield, Beresford, Andrews, Chambers, Staddon, Wise and Williams-Findlay, 2006; Heffernan, 2006). While we acknowledge that the use of the term "service user" may require further discussion in this particular context, for the purposes of this article, the notion of service user involvement will refer to those people who were or still are receiving social welfare services and are involved in some or all parts of social work education.

SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

The administration of England as a welfare state has undergone major reforms since its inception, also in respect of the roles and tasks of social workers in the late seventies (Barclay, 1982). The later rise of Thatcher's New Right and New Managerialism caused a shift within public sector management which continued under New Labour (Department of Health, 1998). This shift implied that case work as the dominant method of work, has given way to more short-term focussed work, with the result that targets have to be met by social work managers within a market based care policy (Harlow, 2004). Another recent reform means that social work in England has been a degree-regulated profession since 2003 and that the title of social workers are protected as they must now register with the General Social Care Council (GSCC), the body responsible for the registration and regulation of conduct and training of social workers in England (GSCC, 2009). As a result, social work is offered as a generic degree preparing students to work with any client groups in various settings. Students, who hold a degree other than in social work, also have the option to study for a Master of Arts qualification in social work. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate route can lead to registration with the GSCC. Specialisation can be achieved through a variety of Post Qualifying Awards, which can lead to a Master's Degree (GSCC, 2009).

The notion of service user involvement, not only in social work education, but also in health and social care services, started to develop in the 1970s,

and gained popularity in the 90s (Hanlon, 2008; Molyneux and Irvine, 2004). Towards the end of the 90s, the then Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), in its aim to regulate and promote the education and training of social workers throughout the United Kingdom, encouraged social work programmes at HEIs to involve service users more closely (Molyneux and Irvine, 2004). In 2002, with the changes brought through the Care Standard Act of 2000 and the subsequent replacement of the former CCETSW with the new GSCC, service user involvement in social work education became a professional requirement for HEIs to grant degrees in social work (Department of Health, 2002). All institutions in England offering qualifying programmes in social work must now meet the requirements set by the Department of Health and involve service users in all aspects of their course delivery (Beresford and Croft, 2004).

Thus, service user involvement in England's social work education programmes is now a widely applied practice. Institutions offering accredited social work programmes are also accorded funding by the GSCC to include service user participation in their curricula. This funding is flexible in its application but must be related to specific service user involvement within an HEI social work course offering payment to service users involved in the planning, delivery and assessment of social work courses (Hutton, 2006).

The Team for the Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England (ESWDQE) found that involvement of service users in social work education was welcomed by all stakeholders and reaffirmed the social work profession's commitment to the principles of citizen participation in all spheres of social work (ESWDQE, 2008). The principle of capacity building is particularly recognised as an important motivation for involving service users. Benefits reported by service users include transferable skills gain from their involvement in social work education, which proved useful for their employment status (ESWDQE, 2008). This feature was particularly highlighted by commentators such as Humphreys (2005) in her account of service user involvement at Warwick University. Furthermore, the use of service users is rated so highly in some HEIs that they are referred to as consultants in a number of papers dealing with service user involvement in social work education (Humphreys, 2005; Anghel, 2006). In fact, students and most social work staff at HEIs perceive service user involvement as positive overall (Branfield, 2007). This was also echoed by recent research undertaken by the ESWDQE (2008) which indicated that students found service user involvement in social work education particularly beneficial as it helped them in the integration of theory and practice.

Despite positive evaluations of service user involvement in social work education, the current requirements for service users to be involved in the design and delivery of social work courses have not worked well in all areas (Social Work Task Force, 2009:17). Some staff in HEIs still lack confidence in service users' ability to teach. The situation is often exacerbated by institutions not supporting service user involvement by imposing overly strict regulations, relating to setting quality standards as to the use of people from outside the institution in the teaching of students (Branfield, 2007). There is also a danger of service user involvement being based on unequal power relationships when involvement is based on tokenism, selection only from certain groups of service users, and "the conflation of different viewpoints" (Gupta and Blewett, 2008:467). Other constraints in service user involvement include, inter alia, payment and the recruitment of service users to be used in education. Indeed, payment of service users constitutes an important barrier to participation. In fact, in some cases, HEIs do not pay for service users to be involved in their programmes, and in other cases, the payment for their involvement means that service users may lose some of their social security benefits (Branfield, 2007). With regard to issues of recruitment, service user groups who participate in social work education remain similar, even where HEIs have departments or staff dealing specifically with the recruitment of service users. The result is that those most disenfranchised, "harder to reach" service users are unrepresented (ESWDQE, 2008:153). This is also emphasised by Hanlon (2008) who identifies challenges for universities in engaging service users and obtaining a sufficiently broad cross-section to be representative of England.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Social work in South Africa has been the only regulated, officially approved profession addressing social welfare issues since 1937 (RSA, 2006). The country adopted a social development paradigm of welfare after democratisation in 1994, which embraced a people-centred approach to social and economic development with the aim to redress the past imbalances in the country (RSA, 1997). As a new approach to social service delivery, social development currently transcends the residual approach that has dominated social welfare discourses of the past. Although social welfare programmes should be available to all people in the country, the primary target groups now are the poor and vulnerable sectors of society. Through a range of service providers, social work plays a major role in promoting the development and social well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities (RSA, 2006; RSA, 1997).

However, the term referring to the beneficiaries of social welfare services in South Africa should be determined by the continuum of levels of social work intervention rendered to different target groups. This is described by the Integrated Service Delivery Model of the Department of Social Development (RSA, 2006), which seeks to improve social services including prevention, early intervention, statutory, residential and alternative care, reconstruction and after-care services. Despite the broad scope of social work services, ranging from prevention in communities to after-care of individuals, it is evident that the term “service user” is not being used in official government and policy documents underpinning social work and social work education in South Africa. Terms that are used in official documents are “clients” and “client systems” (SACSSP, 2007; RSA, 2006; RSA, 1997), “consumers of social services” (RSA, 2006; RSA, 1997), “beneficiaries” (RSA, 2006) “target groups” (RSA, 2006; RSA, 1997) and “members of the community engaged in social development programmes” (SACSSP, 2007). Furthermore, the Social Service Professions Act, No 110 of 1978 does not refer to any of the before-mentioned terms, although the Act defines the parameters of the social service professions in South Africa (RSA, 1978).

In compliance with the Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978), social workers and social work students in South Africa have to register with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), which regulates the practices of the social work profession, determines standards and exercises control over the professional conduct of social workers and student social workers. The Ethical Code (SACSSP, 2007:8.3.4a) states explicitly that “The best interest of clients should be served at all times” and provides guidelines regarding inter alia confidentiality, disclosure of information, coercion, exploitation and manipulation. Significantly, the Ethical Code determines specifically that “...only social workers may function as supervisors during education, training and development of student social workers” (SACSSP, 2007:5.1.5d). The minimum basic requirements for social work educators and by implication for assessors of theoretical and practice learning furthermore, are registration with the SACSSP, a professional degree in social work and a minimum of five years' appropriate experience (RSA, 2003).

Consequently the context of South African social work education does not foster service user involvement in the same way than is understood in the definition provided in this article of service user involvement, specifically due to the statutory requirements for qualified social workers to teach. Thus, even informal involvement of service users with students' learning activities, arranged by individual social work educators, could be contentious within the

existing statutory framework, because social work is regarded as a professional qualification (RSA, 2003) within the parameters of the SACSSP's Ethical Code (SACSSP, 2007). This maintains the prestige, status, integrity and dignity of the profession and seeks to ensure that service users' needs are met through the governance of the profession. Thus, on a policy and statutory level, the education of student social workers is currently not viewed as a terrain conducive to increasing service users' personal confidence, skills and knowledge, as a means to broaden further education, or to provide paid work or public service for service users. This means that only registered professional social workers are employed for the facilitation of direct and indirect inputs into the theoretical and practice learning components of social work education, be it university-based academics or practitioners in a practice environment.

The selection of student social workers, provision of teaching and learning, preparation for practice learning, student placements and learning agreements are, furthermore, academic and administrative issues to be dealt with by universities (RSA, 2003). The design of the social work degree as well as the quality assurance is currently the statutory mandate of the professional quality-assurance body (SACSSP) together with the university concerned. Moreover, the implementation of assessment strategies to ensure that exit level and critical cross-field outcomes of the social work degree are achieved is the sole responsibility of the university staff, in compliance with the minimum basic requirements for assessors in accordance with the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (HEQC) (RSA, 2003). The replacement of the South African Qualifications Authority Act (RSA, 1995) with a new National Qualifications Framework Act (RSA, 2008) changes the education scene in South Africa significantly, especially as far as the quality assurance functions of relevant quality assurance bodies are concerned. To this end, evaluations of student social workers' achievements are still a joint venture only between university educators, agency-based field supervisors (both registered social workers) and learners.

EXAMINATION OF CONGRUENCY OF PRACTICES IN ENGLAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

In an examination of service user involvement in social work education in England and South African practices, it would be relatively simple to identify which constituent parts are undertaken in each country. This, however, would assume that all social work education globally meets a single model of social work education practice. Indeed, even though a set of universal social work standards and values may influence the various social work schools' curricula

worldwide, the cultural, political and economical differences found in various countries result in social work practices and education that are diversified (Hendriks, Kloppenburg, Gevorgianien and Jakutien, 2008). Consequently, the lens through which service user involvement is to be viewed should include country-specific, socio-economic and political narratives and should recognise that the terminology used is also anchored within particular discourses, cultures and historical contexts. As a result, a simple examination is not possible, without viewing service user involvement within its unique context. The appropriateness of service user involvement in South African practices should therefore be construed based on the aetiology of both those who receive and deliver social work services, as well as the corresponding education offered. As an exhaustive examination is outside the remit of this article, merely the potential appropriateness for specific service user practices of interest within a South African context will be explored.

Although service user involvement provides significant benefits to social work students in England, there is a danger that this perspective relates solely to those service users who are articulate, accessible and who have successfully utilised England's market-driven context of care (Gupta and Blewett, 2008). Those service users in England who are socially most excluded, less articulate and are often at the receiving end of coercive services might still not be heard, until students take up their field work placements. Even then, whether or not their voices will influence social work education is debatable. Bearing in mind the difficulties to involve the most marginalised recipients of services successfully, the challenge for service user involvement in social work education is even greater in a South African context, where the focus of social work is on the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable and socially excluded people in society (RSA, 2006).

However, the mere notion of service user involvement in social work education raises issues of civic participation. Whilst in England the number of people who participated in democratic elections in 2005 was 61,3 percent (Tetteh, 2008), the voting percentage in the 2009 South African elections was 77,3 percent (IEC, 2009), suggesting much greater citizen engagement in the South African democracy. England's rights of citizens also differ from South Africa's in terms of guaranteed access to healthcare, housing, social security, education and special rights for children under the South African Constitution, with opportunities for citizens to petition the Constitutional Court for violations of their rights (Bill of Rights, 1996). In contrast, England has no formal constitution, and rights afforded to citizens are based in statute and case law, but citizens have no ascribed rights to, for example, healthcare, housing and education (Maer and Horne, 2009). An illustration of this can be

found within the Department of Health (2006) policy “Our Health, Our Care, Our Say” which demonstrates a continued shift away from traditional social work service areas such as psycho-social problems, aging, and trauma to problems relating to supporting all socially excluded people to participate in the workplace. This shift in focus of social work begins to raise questions about the democratic context in which services are developed, provided and evaluated in England. Moreover, Government policy in England has increasingly moved away from citizens' rights to citizens' responsibilities. Examples of this movement can be seen in mental health legislation where compulsory action can be taken if citizens do not accept the help offered (Jordan, 2004). Government and many statutory organisational policies in England thus increasingly do not support the direct delivery of services as these are purchased from independent sector organisations (Parton, 2006). Significantly, most social workers remain employed in statutory local authority services as assessors of social work need (Lyons and Manion, 2004). In South Africa, a large quantity of social work services are delivered through non-government and community-based organisations, employing social workers who render direct and front-line services in partnership with the Department of Social Development (RSA, 2006). These practitioners, as those employed by public welfare, are thus directly in contact with community issues and render services across the board to all people of South Africa, but specifically the most needy and vulnerable people.

Other initiatives in England have sought to promote increased accountability of services to those who use them and as a result, policy has moved towards the development of individual budgets whereby service users are responsible to find their own services and pay for them through the budget that has been allocated to them (Department of Health, 1998). However, this expanded consumer model risks distorting the availability of and access to care, with those who are most disadvantaged needing to compete with more articulate and financially capable service users for limited resources, thereby increasing their disadvantage. This model of accountability and choice presupposes that all consumers would act rationally, have full information and capacity to make informed decisions and would be able to choose between a plethora of high quality and affordable services. It is, therefore, debatable whether service users active in social work education in England represent the whole spectrum of service delivery.

In terms of service delivery, the SACSSP Code of Ethics (SACSSP, 2007a) makes social workers in South Africa directly responsible to all peoples of South Africa, by keeping social workers professionally liable for all their professional practices, in contrast with England where organisational policy

may have greater sway (Department of Health, 2006). Service user interests in South Africa are thus guarded by the social work profession, with social workers having much greater autonomy in their professional judgement and decision-making than those in England (Freidson, 1994). Indeed, as O'Brian (2003:391) comments on the matter of British social work, rapid change is experienced through the development of new Government policies, regulations and guidelines, which circumscribe professional judgment rendering the social worker's role somewhat different to those based on the two traditional social work values of personal caring and social justice. A third value base thus appears to have emerged in England that might be called "resource and risk management".

Conversely, the independence of the social work profession in South Africa is largely guarded from intrusion by the State, which is key to the relationship between professionals and the recipients of their services (Dingwall and Fenn, 1987). In England, the GSCC regulates the training and registration of professionals, but the regulation of the profession conforms less to the ideal model of what constitutes a profession than in South Africa. As an example the GSCC currently has only two social work-qualified Council members out of its seven Council members whilst in South Africa the SACSSP has a significant number of social work-qualified Council members (GSCC, 2009; SACSSP, 2009a).

It is thus evident from the preceding discussion that professional and ethical responsibilities differ between the two countries with all South African social work teaching staff having to maintain current registration with the SACSSP as a requirement to lecture in social work programmes. There is no similar requirement in England, which often results in mixed teaching teams with some staff being accountable in terms of their registration, whilst others are not governed by the GSCC Code of Practice for Social Care Workers and Code of Practice for Employers of Social Care Workers (GSCC, 2009). It is, therefore, at least theoretically possible for social work students, due to their requirement to register, to have greater accountability to the profession than those who are providing input as lecturers or users of services. Additionally, where service users who participate at a university are paid, the university would have some employment responsibility, but little professional responsibility if adverse issues are experienced as a result of their engagement. In South Africa, service users who might be brought in to a university have to answer to the Code of Ethics (SACSSP, 2007) and to the professional responsibility requirement of the social work lecturer who engaged them. However, for most South African universities there are no mechanisms to fund service users' involvement, although there is probably a

greater tradition of volunteering and community service in South Africa than in England.

Other challenging aspects in service user involvement in social work education centre on the vast geographical differences and spread of universities in South Africa. Not only are distances substantial, especially in rural areas, but public transport links and literacy levels of service users vary considerably. Without payment, many service users would be unable to travel or afford to contribute to social work education. No funding is provided by any institution in South Africa, in contrast to the GSCC in England, which supports service user engagement. Moreover, social work students in South Africa are obliged to fund their own travel expenses, in contrast with their English counterparts. Involving service users in South African social work education would therefore mean creating accessible funding to at least meet basic travel and subsistence expenses relating to service user involvement.

In addition, training of service users, preparation and debriefing of students, service users and academics, together with extensive involvement in the module design, language accessibility and continuous monitoring have been identified by several authors as important requirements to ensure successful integration of service users into the teaching programmes of social work students (Anghel, 2006; Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2005; Beresford and Croft, 2004; Molyneux and Irvine, 2004). However, although these requirements are mandatory for the delivery of social work degrees and are perceived as making a positive contribution to the education of social work students, ongoing challenges in terms of service user involvement are posed to social work education in England (Gupta and Blewett, 2008). In the South African context, it would probably take much more to adopt the requirements of service user involvement in education than just pointing out the congruency with principles of democracy, empowerment, accountability and economic, social and political engagement and participation. Although these principles correspond with those within South Africa's social development paradigm (RSA, 2006), and service user involvement is seen as a move away from a medical model of social work education (Branfield, 2007), it is doubtful whether the direct importation of the English model of service user involvement is needed to instil principles of social development in South African social work education.

CONCLUSION

Globally, service user involvement in social work education is loaded with opportunities and challenges. However, the appropriateness of service user

involvement in all contexts is debatable. Social workers usually deliver services to those citizens who are most disenfranchised and socially excluded, often as a result of socio-political policies and systems. From a juxtaposition of practices in England and South Africa, it is evident that both countries' unique socio-economic and political contexts and discourses contribute to a grave incongruence in the appropriateness of service user involvement in each country. Although the involvement of service users has the potential to bring "real life" into social work education, the involvement of service users as a requirement for HEIs to award a professional social work qualification without extensive debate and reflection would be ill-considered in the South African context. However, with an increasing number of countries worldwide drawing on service user involvement as a matter of principle in good practice in social work education, the statutory framework, policies and practices of social work education in South Africa could be challenged in future to adopt a context-specific and "real life" involvement of service users to achieve exit-level outcomes and to meet the associated assessment criteria of the BSW qualification.

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