

Summary

Knowledge review 6: Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education

social care
institute for excellence



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What is this knowledge review about?

Knowledge review 6: Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education is the second in a series of SCIE knowledge reviews looking at how core social work skills are taught in social work education. The review, jointly commissioned with the Social Policy and Social Work Learning and Teaching Support Network (SWAPItsn), looks at how communication skills (that is, oral and written communication with people who use social care services) are being taught and to what effect. It draws out common messages from existing research and identifies areas where more research is needed to support good practice.

Who is this knowledge review for?

This knowledge review will help people who teach social work (that is, academics, practice teachers and service users) in developing a framework for teaching communications skills. It will also help researchers by identifying areas where more information is needed. The review may also be of interest to students and social care workers.

How was the knowledge review conducted?

A team of six people from different universities conducted the knowledge review. They looked at existing research and literature that focused on improving the communication skills of social care workers through the teaching of communication skills. The group assessed all information for relevance and quality.

Summary of the review

Introduction

Good communication, both oral and written, is at the heart of best practice in social work. Communication skills are essential for establishing effective and respectful relationships with service users, and are also essential for assessments, decision making and joint working with colleagues and other professionals.

Failure to communicate well can have serious consequences: this kind of failure contributed to the death of Victoria Climbié.

The new social work degree puts a strong emphasis on communicating well with service users and carers and it is a core learning outcome. Because of this, SCIE thought it was important to find out how communication skills are being taught, and to what effect, and to identify areas for development.

Key findings

The review team presented a summary of key findings from the literature review. While they identified some very good examples of teaching communication skills in social work education, the team's overall finding was that many different types of teaching approaches are being used and there is little commonly agreed information underpinning education programmes. They identified six areas for further research.

- **Theory:** few articles were clear about the theory on which they were based. This suggests that students are taught in a 'hands-on' way without the theory to back it up. This needs to be addressed to ensure that the teaching of communication skills in social work education is based on proven theory and is relevant to social work practice. More work needs to be done on how some of the theory about teaching and learning communication should be used in practice.
- **The framework of teaching and learning:** the ways in which communication skills are taught are as important as what is taught. Little of the literature suggested teaching frameworks that could accommodate different learning styles, and there are some concerns about where and how social work educators are trained, both in the content of teaching communication skills and in the approach used.
- **The transferability of communication skills:** it is unclear whether the skills students are learning in the classroom are transferable to the workplace and whether they can be used in different, often difficult, situations. Communication skills training must be better integrated with practice learning.
- **Evaluation:** there is little information about how effectively communication skills are being taught and how well students are learning these skills. More work is needed on defining and measuring outcomes and the ways in which technology can be employed in supporting face-to-face learning and teaching.
- **User involvement:** evidence about service user involvement in teaching was absent from the literature reviewed. This is perhaps because of the relatively recent interest in this area. The core requirement of service user views in the design and delivery of the new degree makes it essential that educators begin to develop partnerships in this area. For more information about involving service users and carers in the social work degree, see SCIE's publication *Resource Guide 2: Involving service users and carers in social work education*.
- **Meeting different communication needs:** the literature review found very little research or guidance about training in written communication skills or how to communicate with people of different cultures and with particular communication needs, for example, people who have English as a second language and children. It is important that more work is done in this area.

Conclusion

The knowledge review identified a range of useful approaches to teaching communication skills but did not identify a unified body of knowledge on which teaching programmes can be based. It has also highlighted areas that need more work. However, the expertise among social work educators is much greater than is reflected in the literature. The findings of one survey indicate that there is a considerable amount of innovative practice being undertaken in this field that is not covered in the literature.

Hopefully, this knowledge review will be a catalyst to encourage educators to publish their knowledge and experience on teaching communication skills and to encourage others to research the areas identified in the key messages.

If the areas identified in the key findings can be developed, there is potential for the teaching and learning of communication skills in social work to be built on firm foundations – an essential prerequisite for effective teaching, learning and practice.

Future work

SCIE is producing a series of publications to support the teaching and learning of core social work skills. A knowledge review about teaching and learning assessment skills has already been published and other publications will focus on law in social work, partnership working, interprofessional working and human growth and development. A resource guide that will direct people to existing information about teaching and learning communication skills in social work education will be published in Summer 2004. Further work will be undertaken on communicating with children – an area the review team identified as needing more work.

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