

The learning, teaching and assessment of partnership: A summary



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Introduction

This Knowledge Review was commissioned to identify what is known about the teaching, learning and assessment of partnership in qualifying social work education and to identify best practice in the learning, teaching and assessment of partnership. There were two parts to the Review: a systematic review of existing research and a practice survey.

The research review covered more than 100 studies, mainly from the UK and the US. The full in-depth review included 13 studies, covering areas of social work practice including domestic violence, palliative care, mental health and geriatric services.

For the practice survey, four courses demonstrating best practice were identified through telephone interviews. Focus groups were held where students, service users and educators were interviewed separately.

The limits of the Review

Due to the lack of robust data, current practice has been examined, rather than evaluated. Most of the studies were qualitative and measured changes in students' attitudes during or immediately after studying. All but two of the studies did not follow up into practice, so changes in practice could not be measured. In addition, the key challenge of how to work in partnership with service users who do not wish to participate (in areas such as mental health) is not addressed by the literature or the practice survey.

What do we mean by partnership?

The development of partnership in social work education can be traced back to the 1980s. The rise of consumerism and disability rights movements challenged the culture of 'clientism' and brought the core values of social work – self-determination and empowerment – to the education system, thus promoting more effective collaborative interprofessional services.

There is conceptual confusion about partnership in the literature. The term was disputed as some tutors pointed to the inherent power differentials between social workers and the families with whom they work. Others argued that partnership is 'a collaborative process whereby the social worker and client work as equals', where the role

is 'not to do for, but rather with clients'. There are many forms of partnership – for example, student/user; student/educator; student/student – but the two main forms of partnership that are dealt with are interprofessional partnership and partnership between students and service users and carers. The practice survey concentrated on the latter, whereas there was a bias towards the former in the research literature.

There was an absence of discussion in the research literature of partnership with user groups/ professional organisations as opposed to individuals, an exception being the University of Dundee where local user and carer groups are formally involved in strategic design and delivery.

What approaches to partnership were identified?

There were, broadly, three approaches to partnership in education: 'embedded' learning, 'discrete' learning and a combined approach. Good practice was identified in all three.

Embedded learning is favoured by some institutions which consider partnership to be crucial to every aspect of social work. For example, at South Bank, Salford, Manchester and Portsmouth Universities, there are joint social work and nursing degrees where students of different professions study together throughout the course.

Discrete learning involves specific projects where students work with local groups, thus enabling them to see service users and carers as a resource rather than 'victims'.

What is the role of service users and carers in partnership?

Good practice was identified particularly at the Universities of Plymouth and Dundee, where service users and carers were heavily involved in programme design and delivery. Service users could be involved in induction weeks, teaching sessions, in videos and as observers and assessors of interviews (e.g. at Plymouth) or simulated role play (at London Metropolitan University). Service users can act as co-trainers or bearers of experience. Structured dialogues with facilitators guiding encounters may be used and service users may assess students' reports (e.g. Plymouth).

What do students and service users learn through partnership?

The objectives of classroom initiatives were to develop students' understanding of service users' points of view, question their own status, debunk stereotypes and develop communication skills, particularly the ability to 'really listen' and empathise. By seeing carers outside 'crisis' situations, students can appreciate their strengths.

Service users gain increased confidence, learning skills and self-esteem, and carers may feel less isolated.

At the University of Sussex, students work together and their collaborative ability is enhanced in this way. It is believed that empowering students provides them with a model for empowering service users in practice. Some of the literature argues that such partnership undermines professional identity; others say that this identity is not lost but rather is adapted.

The limits of service user participation

Service user involvement in this context is complex. Where service users are not sufficiently engaged in the design of the course, or are not involved for long enough, there is a danger of 'tokenism'. Service users may take discussions in directions that suit their own agendas, and a balance needs to be maintained between personal testimony and critical analysis. There is also the danger that where service users are trained, they become professionalised and so lose their independent role as service users. One method to overcome this is through the use of videos, and so avoiding direct classroom participation. There is also a tendency for participants to be ex-service users and not current ones.

The role of interprofessional partnership

The need for interprofessional partnership is shown by the widespread belief of social workers that they are understood by nurses and health visitors, but not by doctors, police or solicitors, the groups with whom they are least likely to share learning. Interdisciplinary exposure during training, for example between social workers and doctors, would facilitate partnership in the workplace, and there is evidence that older students who have not been so exposed are more resistant to partnership. Some initiatives focused on students developing understanding of other professions and their core knowledge and value bases.

The need to foster 'combined understanding but separate talents' is stressed in the literature, as lack of clarity in interprofessional education can lead to resentment and the entrenchment of positions. Initiatives where students from different professions learn together throughout their course are rare, however.

How effective is partnership in education?

Coverage in the literature of the implications of 'race', class, sexuality, religion and culture was scarce, and it is argued that without explicit teaching in these areas, there will be little understanding of the barriers to partnership they can cause.

Due to the lack of long-term follow-up, few firm conclusions can be drawn. Initiatives such as the new programmes at Plymouth and Dundee need strong institutional support, and user involvement in assessment requires time and resources to work well. Interprofessional education is driven by a policy agenda and user/carer partnership by an empowerment agenda, and more extensive evaluation is required to explore the relationship between aims and outcomes and develop good practice. Is the aim to create a new kind of flexible practitioner or do we need, as one programme director put it, 'not only a different kind of worker but different organisation'?

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This knowledge review aimed to identify best practice in teaching, learning and assessment of partnership in social work qualifying education, evaluate methods used and examine how stakeholders are involved. All of SCIE's publications and resources are free.

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