

‘We’re here tae mak a difference’

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Introduction

This paper presents an account of the work undertaken by *The Group*. *The Group* comprises a number of young people who represent the voice of those with care experiences. They have been involved in the education of social work students within the School of Applied Social Studies at the Robert Gordon University (RGU) for the past two years. Writing the paper presented a challenge in terms of how the views of the participants could be presented for an academic journal. *The Group* members are all articulate and confident at sharing their views verbally, but many feel let down by the education system and are less confident in their writing skills. After some thought and discussion it was decided that group members would give their input by way of a digital recording device modelled on a ‘Big Brother-style’ diary room.

All members of *The Group* have experiences of care including various forms of residential care. Some of the most powerful teaching inputs given by these young people have addressed the complexities of group living and the impact it has on service users and their families. The words of *The Group* members will be integrated throughout the paper. The background context describing the reasons for involving service users in social work education will be explored, as will the mechanism by which *The Group* initially came into being. Some examples of the work undertaken by *The Group* will be described, accompanied by a critical evaluation from both the young people and the students involved. The paper will conclude with our hopes for the future and how these might be realised.

Keywords: residential child care; collaborative learning; service users

Establishing *The Group*: ‘A big day out’

The Group was initiated as a response to the requirement from the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) Annual Report (2004) to establish collaborative learning involving service users, carers and employers. A key element of this initiative was to bring the experience of service users and carers into the university classroom. At the Robert Gordon University (RGU), it was felt that this voice should include the children and young people with experiences of care. As it transpired, *The Group* members are able to address many other areas of social work practice based on their life journey, not just the ‘arena’ of residential child care.

Their wealth of direct involvement with social workers in a variety of roles has been invaluable in face-to-face teaching.

Instrumental in the genesis of *The Group* was the involvement of the Debate Project, an existing service user group made up of care leavers and run by the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum. Invitations to attend a 'big day out' event went out to all of the services for looked-after young people in the north-east of Scotland. The format of the 'big day out' was to offer the young people an insight into social work teaching at RGU, some fun icebreaking games and a group exercise to focus the participants on the role that RGU staff were hoping that they would perform. This group exercise was entitled 'the ideal social worker.' It was so successful that it became the main tool in the first teaching session with the social work students. *The Group* exercise finished with a nice lunch in the sports centre. As a result of this exercise, *The Group* was formed and has a membership drawn from a representative cross-section of young people with experiences of care and beyond.

The main objective discussed at the outset was to develop a self-sustaining group of children and young people who would be able to assist the School of Applied Social Studies in developing their effectiveness in the training of social work students. It was envisaged that this would be achieved through their involvement in:

- developing course materials
- teaching inputs
- selection of students
- selection of staff
- networking with other youth participation groups
- contributing to the body of research in this developing field.

This paper is an indication of how far *The Group* has advanced some of these aspirations. A more detailed breakdown of some of the work undertaken to date will be explored later in the paper.

Philosophy

The process of engaging with this group of service users has proactively addressed issues relating to ensuring the fullest participation possible, utilising the best practice guidance developed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Wright, Turner, Clay and Mills, 2005). This was a developmental process which highlighted a number of complex questions including:

- How can young people be equally involved in teaching?
- Who takes the lead in supporting user involvement?
- Has RGU the significant energy and resources needed for the process?
- How can RGU avoid a tokenistic approach that is reactive to external deadlines?
- How do social work education providers promote more sustainable engagement?
- How can young people utilise their involvement to promote their personal development?

The process called for an inclusive approach that acknowledged the diversity of experiences among looked-after children and young people in the north-east of Scotland. It also highlighted the need to address a cultural shift for the School of Applied Social Studies in developing a 'whole system' approach (Wright et al., 2005, p. 12-13). The key elements of a whole system approach are:

- Culture: this refers to the ethos of the organisation, one shared by all staff and service users, which demonstrates a commitment to participation.
- Structure: this refers to the planning, development and resourcing of participation evident in the organisation's infrastructures.
- Practice: this refers to the ways of working, facilitation of involvement and utilisation of the skills and knowledge that enables children and young people to become involved.
- Review: this refers to monitoring and evaluation systems that contribute to the evidence of change brought about by the participation of children and young people.

These can be conceptualised as in a jigsaw puzzle, offering a joined-up approach, with the focus shifting appropriately between the four elements in order to reflect needs and priorities at any given time. The 'whole system approach' aims to avoid hierarchical structures which inhibit the fullest participation of minority groups.

Turning philosophy into reality

Developing this philosophy started with the views and feelings of the participants. *The Group* was asked to think about why they wanted to be involved in helping RGU in social work training. Using the 'diary room', members were asked to answer the question 'Why I got involved in *The Group*.' The following section will outline some of their answers to this question. The answers are given verbatim here to allow readers to engage with the actual words of the young people as they wished them to be represented.

I got involved in The Group because I wanted to meet new people, and wanted to do new things and I just wanted to interact with everyone else that had been in care. (YP1)

The reason I got involved in The Group to start with, I got invited along to a big day out. Jeremy came down to my pad to see if anybody would be interested in joining a service user group and to start with I did it just for something to do and then realised the potential, so that was to help with the stuff that we do. It's interesting, the teaching we do makes you feel like you are doing something, like I am doing something especially because I am a bit older it feels like work even though it's voluntary. (YP2)

One of the main reasons I got involved was because I wanted to help make social work better in Aberdeen. So that the youth of today didn't have to go through

or the youth of tomorrow didn't have to go through what the youth of yesterday had to go through. (YP3)

I got involved with The Group because I heard about it from a member of staff I was living with. It was two years ago when a group from Glasgow came down and we all met and then we decided after that meeting that people from this area would meet and do the same thing. (YP4)

Really to make a difference for young people who are in care. (YP5)

I got involved with The Group to make social workers better, to make future young people not go through the same stuff I went through. (YP6)

Firstly I got involved with The Group because I felt it was important that people working in social work and social care had a real idea of what it was like to be a service user. I experienced lots of different things and felt that really the things I experienced something positive should come out of them somewhere along the lines. (YP7)

Some of the things I experienced were negative in my view and I feel quite strongly about the fact that I think that these things should change and there are certain things that shouldn't go on within social care. (YP8)

It feels really good to be involved with people who are already working with service users and people who plan too, just because I think its important that they want to know what it's like for people who have had first hand experience, to know that they are open to learning and to listening and to taking things on board and also it's nice to think that all the things I have gone through, those experiences might and can make some difference to other people in my situation and also to how the students will work in future. (YP9)

I think it can make a difference because studying doesn't really give you any real life practical experience and if these students who are training if they have never experienced any of the things in the way of life that people who are service users have experienced then it can make it very difficult for them to understand what it is like so I think listening to real life experiences and learning things from people who have been there makes a difference because there is no way of having that first hand knowledge without experiencing it yourself or finding out from people who have experienced it. (YP10)

As can be seen, a strong theme of changing practice in a positive way emerges from the views of the young people. Also, a sense of optimism that they can make a difference is apparent in the quotations. The sense of self-worth experienced by the young people through their contributions to social work training is also clear.

The first teaching experience

During the first semester of 2005 *The Group* prepared to teach the new intake of social work students. As noted below, the composition of the student cohort includes many young people coming on to the course straight from school at the age of 18

years. As a result, some members of *The Group* were older than the students. The format of the teaching session was based around the 'ideal social worker' exercise and the experience of meeting and greeting a service user for the first time. *The Group* organised the random allocation of the 60 students into groups. One young person from *The Group* acted as a facilitator for each of *The Groups* of students. They encouraged the students to clear away the tables and chairs so that the exercise could take place on the floor with everyone at the same level. One student in each random group lay on a large piece of paper and had their outline drawn. The desirable qualities of a social worker were written within the outline and undesirable characteristics were noted outside the outline. During the task, the young person facilitating *The Group* would be able to prompt and, where appropriate, share experiences. The discussion offered students the opportunity to share their experiences and motivations for coming into social work. The second exercise offered the students the opportunity to meet and greet a service user for the first time, by way of shaking hands. The facilitator would then offer feedback on the first impression that the student made. The whole morning was a challenging and rewarding experience for both the students and *The Group* members. Some of the evaluation comments received from the students during the two years that this teaching has been delivered are reproduced here:

I think there should be more of these kinds of sessions as it is very intimidating to meet service users and you're never prepared of what to say, and practicing helps. (YP1)

It surprised me. Service users tend to prefer their social worker who is not 'textbook' - prefer a human. (YP2)

I was slightly intimidated as I did not know what was to be expected. Alex - our 'leader'- made us all feel very comfortable although he should have been more concerned and nervous considering the situation. (YP3)

This refreshed me and was a very clever idea to do this. It reinforced to me that I was on the right course, and felt passionate to start working with these clients... (YP4)

It was strange being told what to do from young people. (YP5)

This session has been brilliant and it has made an enormous impression on me. (YP6)

The comments reflect the positive way in which these inputs have been received and the profound effect that the style of teaching had on the students. Feedback from students also highlighted the value for them in providing authentic lived experiences into which they can integrate their theoretical knowledge. They have also commented favourably on the impact of meeting service users, confirming their passion for the profession they have chosen. *The Group* also evaluated how the teaching sessions went. Their findings are outlined below:

Social workers need to be more open, less guarded about certain things. They should be caring, understanding, open minded. But often you do not find this in social workers. (YP1)

Life experience or age is an issue - it seems that there are now people leaving school and coming straight onto a social work degree, and group members questioned whether this would enable them to understand the issues involved. (YP2)

There was one of us in each small group of students - 'I tried asking them questions but they kept turning it round and asking me what I thought. I wanted to know what they thought!' (YP3)

I went to shake hands with the students but one girl wouldn't shake my hand, she said she had a phobia about shaking hands. What kind of social worker is she going to be if she can't even shake hands? (YP4)

We divided the students into groups and some of them didn't want to go in The Group we were putting them in, they were trying to cheat - so we made them stay in the right group, they should be able to manage without their friends and see what it's like. (YP5)

We got them all to sit on the floor along with us but some of them didn't want to sit on the floor, they wanted to sit on chairs, higher up, looking down on us. (YP6)

In terms of the points made above it was the direct contact in the teaching situation, coupled with the members' previous experiences that highlighted some of the challenges in preparing people to become effective social workers.

The feeling of being involved in teaching

Members of *The Group* have, to date, delivered teaching inputs over a range of social work courses including to first and second year full-time students, second and third year SIRCC distance learning students and postgraduate students. It is important to stress *The Group* meets regularly and plans for the teaching inputs, particularly in relation to sharing only what they feel comfortable with and how it relates to the learning objectives of the session. The areas covered include values, ethics and rights, empowerment and participation, transitions through the residential and looked-after experience, associated experiences of education and access to mainstream activities as well as core skills training in role-playing scenarios. In addition members of *The Group* have been able to share experiences of the impact that poverty, deprivation, loss, mental health problems, substance misuse and offending behaviour has had on their lives. Young people used the 'diary room' to give their views on the classroom experience:

It feels funny teaching students because I am only 14 and like it feels weird because they are way older than me. It feels funny to teach them but apart from that it's good. (YP1)

It feels ace teaching students, its amazing like I said I don't work it's the only work I do, this and go to meetings.....I love being in the room with other students `cos you feel like it's worthwhile, everything you're doing is worthwhile. That's why I joined The Group, we haven't had any bad feedback at all it's all been good, which just proves it's a good thing and makes it really enjoyable especially. It feels ace teaching students just because you know you are helping make a difference. (YP2)

The teaching, I like the teaching. I think it's a very good thing to do, to teach students, and I think we should do more of it because I think they are learning better from us from what they are of other people. (YP3)

Quite good actually, `cos it's giving something back and bringing in new social work for the future. (YP4)

It feels ok to teach the students `cos it just makes me feel better that you're putting something into society, making a difference. (YP5)

Some of the things I experienced were negative in my view and I feel quite strongly about the fact that I think that these things should change and there are certain things that shouldn't go on within social care. (YP6)

In addition to classroom teaching members of *The Group* have undertaken presentations at conferences and short courses. They have developed skills in using Powerpoint and utilising small group exercises to support the learning process.

Personal development

At the heart of the enhancement of the training of social work students must be reciprocal benefits for the young people. Changing Lives (Roe, 2006) clearly places service users and carers at the table in terms of service development. It is a stark reality that educational outcomes for those who have been in care are abysmally poor (Dixon and Stein, 2003). Only one percent progress to higher education as against 48 percent of the general population. Up to 40 percent of young people leaving care have no qualifications at all. One major challenge is to offer a form of accreditation of the skills developed in delivering the inputs to the University.

The Group's composition reflects a microcosm of the general profile of those with care experiences. During the past year, five out of the ten members have had significant transitions in their lives. Some of these have been planned and some have not. Many have struggled to enter or maintain education, training and employment placements. It is a core principle of *The Group's* philosophy that members should have access to personal development opportunities. To this end the majority of *The Group* undertook the leadership academy at Columba 1400 on Skye. This intensive five-day residential experience develops and builds on personal values and strengths. It works holistically involving both young people and supportive adults in the programme. It offered *The Group* a unique opportunity to explore and realise its latent potential to do great things, both personally and collectively. Both staff and young people graduated at the end of one of the most transformational weeks of our lives. At the heart of these

developments is a commitment to developing a culture of learning which embraces all the participants; students, young people and academic staff.

The future

It has to be stated that the obvious value of *The Group* is not self-evident to everyone and the aspirations of the 21st Century Review are some way from being met. The future direction of *The Group* depends on securing significant funding to facilitate the employment of a development worker. It is hoped that this worker may have care experiences and be in a position to support further growth. Such a staff member can offer ring-fenced time that cannot be achieved currently within the demands of a lecturer's workload.

To achieve this goal *The Group* has worked with the Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Service to constitute itself and set the necessary systems in place to bid for funding. In addition, the issues around the autonomy of *The Group* require to be addressed. Another possibility under consideration is to approach a 'host agency' that could use existing resources to promote bids for funding. Links are established with Who Cares? Scotland and the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care which should prove supportive to the continued existence of *The Group*. Should these developments progress as desired, the School of Applied Social Studies at RGU would achieve a relationship with *The Group* based on the purchaser/provider model.

Running in parallel with the large-scale bids to maintain the existence of *The Group*, there is the need to maintain the relationships that are at the heart of the ongoing developments to facilitate the delivery of *The Group's* core objectives. Without these, *The Group* would cease to exist. The pace of progress is critical and it is our experience that it may not move fast enough for the young people involved. Commitment can wane if expectations are not met within reasonable timescales. Here, to end the paper, are the aspirations of *The Group* for future developments:

I would like The Group to get involved with other people and like not just to keep the people that have had a care experience or people like social workers but to think outside the box and get people who have got like families and people who are in care. (YP1)

I'd like The Group to get bigger, better, more committed, get more funding so we can expand, do a lot more teaching. Maybe, no maybe I would like to not just teach at RGU but maybe teaching at other places, getting us to come and teach at other Uni's, that would be good, that's one thing I would like The Group to do more. (YP2)

I think The Group needs to do a lot more teaching and do a lot more things together and be a lot more active and do lots more things together because I don't think we are doing enough things together. (YP3)

To do more teaching really and to really make a difference in social care all over Scotland. (YP4)

I'd like to get more involved with The Group, go to meetings and whatever, go to more conferences, hopefully get all The Group back together but I cannot see that happening. (YP5)

I think The Group has done some really good work and I think The Group have come a long way since we've started. I'd like to see The Group being a bit more independent and The Group as a whole trying to be a bit more forward thinking and more independent. (YP6)

References

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