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Reflections on Inspiring Conversations in Social Work Education: the voices of Scottish Experts by Experience and Italian Students

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Abstract

For many years, Experts by Experience (EBE) have participated in the learning journeys of social work students at the University of Dundee (Scotland) and the Catholic University of Milan (Italy). This chapter draws on practices of user involvement at these two European Universities. Drawing on the voices of three EBE, as co-authors, and three undergraduate students, the chapter explores the experience and impact of user involvement on: student learning; challenging perceptions of service users, and at a personal level. Considering the increasing literature on models and the practice of service user involvement in social work education, understanding the impact of this involvement from the perspective of EBE and students is limited. This chapter contributes to addressing this lacuna, we use the concept of 'inspiring conversations' as a conduit for guiding the future inclusion of tacit knowledge in social work education across Europe.

Introduction

There is an increasing literature setting out models and good practice in service user involvement in social work education (Cabiati and Levy, 2020; Askheim et al. 2017; Duffy et al. 2017; Tanner et al. 2015; Robinson and Webber, 2013; Skilton, 2011). Pedagogically this work is framed by approaches to integrating the voices, lived experiences and experiential knowledge of service users and carers into social work education. Whilst these voices are becoming less marginal within social work education, the contribution of service users and carers as co-authors in this literature is less visible (Bell et al., 2020; Levy et al., 2020, 2016; Fox, 2016; McPhail, 2007). This chapter contributes to addressing this lacuna through being co-authored with three Scottish service users and/or carers, also called Experts By Experience (EBE). All three have written reflectively on their experiences of involvement in social work education and their perceptions of the impact of their involvement on students' learning, social work practice, and on them personally. The chapter also includes reflective accounts written by Italian social work students as part of their course work. The EBE and students all used the concept of 'inspiring conversations' (Cabiati and Levy, 2020) as a starting point to explore and reflect on their experiences of user involvement in social work education.

Experts by Experience (EBE), rather than service users, is used in this chapter as a term that more coherently conveys the essence of experiential and tacit knowledge; that is knowledge acquired through living with a disability, being a family carer and/or receiving social services. The term EBE locates experiential, tacit knowledge in the experiences of service users; but is also inclusive of people who, for a variety of reasons, do not receive services (McLaughlin, 2009). More broadly the term engages with the struggles, emotions and muted voices from the margins and with people living precarious lives.

We start the chapter by discussing the concept of 'inspiring conversations'; second, we contextualise the involvement of EBE in social work education at the University of Dundee, Scotland, and the Catholic University of Milan, Italy. We then present reflections from the three co-authors, Dow, Dowson and Swankie, and from student social workers. We close the chapter with some thoughts on the impact and outcomes of user involvement and propose 'inspiring conversations' as a conduit for guiding the future inclusion of tacit knowledge in social work education across Europe.

Inspiring Conversations in the Involvement of Experts by Experience (EBE) in Social Work Education

The concept of 'inspiring conversations' emerged from a comparative study (Cabiati and Levy, 2020) based on the involvement of Experts by Experience (EBE) in social work education in Italy and Scotland. 'Inspiring' refers to how conversations, between EBE and students, when framed within reciprocal, trusting and engaging relationships can be stimulating and impactful on all involved: students, EBE and academics (Duffy, 2020; Driessens et al. 2016; Rooney et al., 2016; Irvine, Molyneux, & Gillman; 2015). For students,

the participation of EBE in their social work studies can inspire reflection on their motivations for choosing a career in social work, and on relational and communication skills (Cabiati and Levy, 2020; Wilken, et al., 2020). It can provoke a deeper and more intense level of learning which Duffy (2020) argues, is most impactful when students are challenged to step out of their comfort zone through a 'pedagogy of discomfort' (Boler, 1999). An approach that can expose students to the 'strangeness' (Kreber, 2014) and uncertainty of social work practice, unsettle and deconstruct stigmatizing attitudes of people in receipt of social services (Cabiati and Raineri, 2016). For EBE, involvement can be meaningful and inspiring. It can lead to increasing the self-confidence of EBE to manage independent lives, to the creation of a new support network (Rooney et al., 2016), and the development of new competencies (Wilken, et al., 2020). These outcomes are achieved through involvement that highlights the strengths and capabilities of EBE, and through their contributions to students' learning being respected and valued. For academics, working with EBE can lead to reflection on their own personal biases (Duffy, 2020), and re-visiting the pedagogy underpinning their teaching (Cabiati and Levy, 2020).

Experts by Experience (EBE) in Social Work Education in Scotland and Italy

Experts by Experience (EBE) have been participating in the learning journeys of social work students at the University of Dundee (Scotland) and the Catholic University of Milan (Italy), for over 17 years and 12 years, respectively. In both institutions, EBE, academics and students work collaboratively across undergraduate and postgraduate qualifying social work programmes. Whilst the context for involvement in the two institutions is quite different, pedagogically they are aligned (Cabiati and Levy, 2020). In Scotland, user involvement has been mandatory on qualifying social work programmes since 2003 (Scottish Executive, 2003). In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, there is no such mandatory directive, and involvement has been at the discretion and commitment of academics.

In Scotland, at the University of Dundee, a Carer and Users (CU) group, made up of EBE, both service users and informal family carers, is actively involved in the social work programmes. Examples of CU group involvement include, sharing their experiential knowledge in lectures; role play; group work; joint presentations with students; assessment; recruitment; and the Chair of the Programme Board. One module, that is structured around the involvement of EBE is *Caring within Integrated Services* (Caring Module) (Cabiati and Levy, 2020; Levy et al. 2020; Levy et al., 2016; Gee et al., 2009). The module enables students and CU group members to meet on a weekly basis over a semester to co-produce an assessed group presentation. At the Catholic University of Milan, Italy, *Full Day* meetings between students and 'Experts by Experience' (EBE) is one example of a successful model of involvement (Cabiati and Levy, 2020; Cabiati and Raineri, 2016). The *Full Day* meetings are divided in two parts: in the morning, each student talks individually with an EBE for two hours. Following a shared lunch in the university canteen, all the participants (students, EBE and academics) meet to discuss and share their thoughts and feelings on the experience.

The two European universities base their involvement of EBE around *Coherence*, *Prudence* and *Sustainability* (Cabiati and Levy, 2020) and the following six key principles. *Coherence* refers to ensuring that involvement is situated holistically within students' overall learning and has pedagogical rigor. *Prudence*, is used to highlight the careful planning that is required to ensure involvement is meaningful and achieves learning outcomes. *Sustainability* is achieved through organizational support, commitment as well as resources.

Six key Principles of User Involvement

1. Human support to manage life challenges arises from a reciprocal relationship between social workers and people in need.
2. Conscientisation and education are conduits to enable people to become 'more fully human in the world in which they exist' (Nyirenda, 1995).
3. 'Experiential knowledge' and 'technical/methodological competences' are complementary and not antagonist (Folgheraiter, 2004).

4. *Experts by Experience* are people from whom to learn for the promotion of anti-oppressive social work education, research and practice.
5. Social workers must be self-aware, sensitive, and equipped with a strong sense of ethical and moral practice.
6. The role of education in achieving social change includes functions of advocacy (Cabiati and Levy, 2020).

In the following two sections, the concept of 'inspiring conversations' is reflected on by those who have been actively involved in user involvement in social work education. First, Dowson, Swankie and Dow, members of the University of Dundee Carers and User (CU) group, reflect on their experiences of sharing their tacit knowledge with students and contributing to social work education. Secondly, Italian social work students, Luca, Michela and Giulia, reflect on their experiences of *Full Day* meetings with EBE.

Experts By Experience: Voices from Scotland

Two key questions shaped the following reflections by Elinor Dowson, Keith Swankie and John Dow: What inspired us to get involved? What inspires us to continue our involvement in social work education?

Elinor

As an unpaid carer/supporter of a relative with mental ill health needs I felt, even at the beginning of this journey, frustrated that human rights were being breached, that care in hospital and in the community was frequently not recovery focused or person-centred, and that too often the balance of power lay with the establishment. When a carers support worker suggested that I become involved with the Carers and Users (CU) group at the University of Dundee, I had no idea that such an opportunity existed. I soon realised that this was not tokenistic consultation as was happening elsewhere. This felt like a lifeline was being thrown to me. It was a chance to share my experiences of feeling helpless and alone when care in the hospital and community was inadequate, patchy or non-existent; and the behaviour of staff, often unknowingly, became part of the problem, rather than an aid to finding a solution.

Occasionally we encountered a social worker who inspired us with hope, who really lit up our lives, who listened and appeared to care, who wanted to help us progress and made us feel that our lives mattered. These experiences affected me deeply, and along with my own conversations with other EBE and practitioners, were to lead me to become passionate about how to effect change. When I joined the CU group, I realised this was a heartfelt opportunity. It offered time to share what had worked well for my relative and for me, and what had hindered the steps on our journey, and how these experiences had made us feel. My involvement was in the fervent hope that the students would be listening, and would be the social workers to bring about the needed change of attitude and behavior; to make the lives of those they encountered much more fulfilled.

The continuity over many years of the CU group means that members are now like a family, inspiring each other; engaging in friendly banter; helping with transport; being there for each other in times of joy and sorrow; delighted and encouraging when members gain in confidence and take on new roles. We are also proud and thankful when we meet a former student who tells us that our involvement made a difference to how they think, and how they have used this to make a difference. Many of the CU group members have, through adversity, become experts in their own field, our stories are constantly evolving, and I am now a carer/supporter for an elderly relative as well as being on the Board of a mental health charity.

Keith

In 2014, my Care Manager asked if I wanted to join the Carers and Users (CU) group at the University of Dundee. She had studied social work at Dundee and had valued the input of EBE. Having had varying degrees of negative and positive experiences as a service user I felt this was an opportunity to share those experiences with future social workers, to help them in their careers and explain the impact that they can have on service users, carers and their families. Having been a confident and successful manager for many

years, I had not done anything like this since becoming ill in 2009. I felt apprehensive. Would I manage to help develop the students as I had previously with my staff? This was going to be another challenge for me personally after losing so much, was I able to give back again?

My involvement in one module led to me receiving written communication from the students who had to write to a service user using one of four scenarios explaining what they, as a social worker, would do in response to one of the scenarios. This activity was something new and uncharted, and I did not know how it would impact on the students or me. The students wrote their responses and as far as they were concerned it was a paper exercise job done. Not so. Some months later, with a surprise visit from myself, I provided feedback to the class. I remember entering the room and it was silent, I had no idea how this was going to pan out. The students listened respectfully and acknowledged the impact of how, what they had written could affect me. It was as if I commanded the room, any doubts I had had about doing this were gone. I felt valued, and the positivity from the students was overwhelming. One student commented, 'I will always remember this and the impact from a real person giving real live feedback.' I knew then I had nailed it. I was delighted that it had gone so well, and the students had gained so much from my work. The time spent on this journey felt inspiring to be able to deliver that developmental role again as I had in the past. I feel very privileged to have been on this journey, contributing to developing the practitioners of the future.

John

In 2002, I was approached by the University of Dundee and asked if I would consider being part of establishing a Carers and Users (CU) group to look at how 'user involvement could be central to social work education'. My name was mentioned as someone who was passionate about user involvement and working for change. My personal interest was driven by my complex needs as regards my physical and mental health, having previously been an inpatient at a large mental health hospital. I was already involved in various mental health groups ranging from a strategy group to an advocacy and support group. Yet, despite being involved in these groups and many positive meetings, there were, and are, times when I ask myself: 'When are we going to see real change from our involvement?'

I found that working with the CU group I had a real opportunity to not only be involved, but to *influence* how change in social services could be achieved and moved forward. Another bonus for me was that, unlike other groups I was *involved* with, working with the CU group would not be 'the never-ending story', where we simply sat at meetings and decided when the next meeting would be. This feeling of *influence* and not just *involvement* was then and still is my main reason for wanting to be an active member of the CU group. We *influence* how social work students learn, and they hear about what it is really like to receive services. This leads to considerably enhancing students' learning experience. However, to see real, demonstrable change in practice, we need to continue to reaffirm what has been learnt and show the real value and *influence* of EBE.

Social Work Students: Voices from Italy

After the *Full Day* meetings with EBE at the Catholic University of Milan, students write personal reflections on the learning experience. The following are extracts from the reflective accounts of three students. The students gave their permission to use their work, and the names of students and EBE have been anonymized using pseudonyms.

Luca

The involvement of EBE in the university programme represented a great opportunity for my learning journey. Last Saturday I met Agostino and the activity was inspiring, even if challenging in some aspects. Initially, I felt curious about the EBE and their life stories, but also afraid of what I should do in the interactions with unknown people that I met for the first time. I was worried that I would not be up to the situation; would not be able to control my emotions and the moments of silence, and not ready to interact in the right way. These worries were based on me never having talked before with a person who has lived with drug addiction or mental health problems. The encounter with Agostino has been an unforgettable

experience. I can only thank him, because on a day like any other, he gave me a profound teaching of life. The idea to involve all the family members in the helping process was a discovery for me: I believed that if the person has a problem (alcohol-addiction), he/she must receive help. Agostino made me consider the sides of the social work profession that I had not yet considered. Speaking with my peers after the experience, I discovered that the contribution of each EBE was a gift for each student. The *Full Day* meeting with EBE left its mark on each of us. For me, the day with Agostino made the difference for my future as a social worker.

Michela

As a first point, the conversations with the EBE inspired me to reflect on my own story. During the conversation with Angela, I spontaneously shared my personal experiences with her, both positive and negative. She inspired me to revisit my behaviour and personal life. I opened up to the EBE and I shared my family story because I felt that she understood me and was not judging. When I was recounting painful events from my life, I felt I could relate to Angela, as a person just like me. I was surprised about what was happening during the conversation because I understood Angela's feelings; and Angela understood my feelings in a way that very few people had. The conversation with Angela increased my confidence in working with people in need, and I fully admired her strength. Listening to her story I felt 'small' in front of the courage, strength and willpower of this woman. As I listened to Angela, I wondered what I would do in her place. I learnt a lot about drug-addiction, self-help and mutual aid groups, but the true value of the activity was at a human level. At the end of the day, I only whispered thanks to Angela, I wanted to say more, but the strong emotions I was feeling prevented me from articulating anything more. I hope to meet her again. This experience confirmed and increased my personal motivation to become a social worker. After the encounter with Angela, I am more passionate about social work and I am more convinced of the path I have chosen for my future. I want to support people in a respectful way, as Angela yesterday respected my feelings and thoughts.

Giulia

The encounters with my EBE inspired me to be aware that during the educational path, before becoming a social worker, we must take care of ourselves and reflect on our personal experiences. For some of us (as for me) the conversation with my EBE generated feelings of discomfort because it touched traumatic memories. Participating in this activity was not easy for me because during the conversation my EBE spoke about problems that I could relate to in my family. When I was speaking with Mario, I had the feeling that I had to walk away into a room and be alone because the emotions were so strong. Reflecting on Mario's experience and on my personal experience, I understood that people who ask for support are asking for their words 'to be heard'. The conversation with Mario made me understand how to handle my emotions in the face of huge suffering. The encounter with my EBE is a unique experience and it should be mandatory for all students who want to become a social worker. This opportunity has led to my deepest learning during my first year at university. I returned home with an inexhaustible inner richness. I fully understood that in our future as social workers it is essential to put aside the presumption that we will know what people want and need in their life. I'm grateful to the EBE who I was fortunate to talk with and I hope there will be similar opportunities in the coming years.

Outcomes and Impact from Student and EBE Encounters

The narratives of Dowson, Swankie and Dow convey effect and impact across three interconnected areas: students' learning, future practice and personal fulfilment. All three authors were motivated by a commitment to social justice; and refer to their experiences of involvement as being meaningful and inspiring, the antithesis of tokenism (Arnstein, 1969). In the words of Dow, '[t]his feeling of influence and not just involvement', and Dowson, 'I soon realised that this was not tokenistic consultation as was happening elsewhere'. Dowson refers to her experiences of social workers 'who inspired us with hope who really lit up our lives'; and how these positive experiences, coupled with negative experiences, inspired her to share her experiential knowledge with student social workers. There is optimism in the three reflections that the students' learning, from spending time with them and other members of the CU group, will lead to

social workers who are able to 'bring about the needed change of attitude and behavior, and make the lives of those they encounter much more fulfilled'. At a personal level, the narratives highlight the significance of effective communication and relationships to achieving outcomes in the lives of the people that social workers engage with; and the importance of creating space where good practice can be modelled in the classroom.

For the students, the conversations with the EBE were inspiring in three interconnected areas: developing professional competences; challenging established perceptions of service users, and at a personal level. The time spent with the EBE resonated with and impacted meaningfully on the Italian students. The students saw the EBE as people who were bravely sharing their life experiences and their tacit knowledge to support their learning and future practice. The meetings provided a safe space to listen to the stories of the EBE, and within this space, they saw reflected in each other, another human being. This process was acknowledged as being unsettling, but as such, it was also a source of deep learning.

To prepare students for practice it is important that they acquire a realistic picture of themselves, of their values and biases, and are open to these being challenged; as Gambrell (2013) argues, critical self-knowledge and self-awareness are 'vital'. Jeffrey (2005:416) refers to 'heightened awareness' through learning 'to 'be' with another person in a caring, attentive way no matter the differences that lie between them'. The encounter with EBE appeared to stimulate students to feel better prepared for meeting and managing strong emotional content in practice (Smith, 2013). Removing barriers between EBE and students, and the honesty that this requires, led students to mirror the EBE, to share their own stories. The students reflected deeply on the similarities and differences in how they would behave if they were in the shoes of the EBE; how they would cope or have coped. This led to the students seeing the person first and not their disability or label; to respect, value and be inspired by the EBE's uniqueness, courage and determination (Cabiati and Raineri, 2016; Corrigan and Penn, 2015). Giulia succinctly articulates the kernel of listening to and involving EBE in social work education and practice, 'it is essential to put aside the presumption that we will know what people want and need in their life'.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has presented insight into the meaning, impact and outcomes of EBE being integral to the learning journeys of social work students in two European countries. The voices of the Scottish EBE and Italian social work students provide a unique and powerful insight into the potential for user involvement in social work education to achieve impact and outcomes on multiple levels (Duffy, 2020; Driessens et al. 2016; Rooney et al., 2016; Irvine, et al., 2015). The reflections respond to questions on whether user involvement in social work education is "meaningful" and 'effective'; including 'meaningful' to who: students, service users and carers or practitioners? and 'effective' where: student learning, social work practice, the everyday lives of service users and carers?' (Levy et al., 2016:868). The word 'inspiring' captures how involvement can be meaningful and effective. Furthermore, 'inspiring', we argue, is a modest, yet powerful conduit for guiding future collaborative involvement of EBE in social work education across Europe.

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