



Historical and Contemporary Synopsis of the Development of Field Education Guidelines in BSW, MSW and Doctoral Programs

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Notes from the Field: Incorporating Authentic Service User Voice in Community Planning

Dunlop and Holosko

Abstract

Service user involvement in local community planning for services has been at the forefront of government policy concern across numerous countries for three decades. However, it is an illusion that equal planning partnerships exist between local service users and providers. We describe a community practice framework for increasing authentic service user voice and participation in local community planning. We contend that social work can have a decided leadership role to play in these oft mandated local planning processes.

Introduction

Service user involvement in local community planning has been at the forefront of government policy decisions for the past few decades, in a host of countries across the globe. While government policies may mandate, and/or highlight service user participation, the lofty contention that service users and providers have joined together in mutually rewarding partnerships for community planning is a longstanding myth. When local service user voice is trivialized by service providers, potentially new knowledge based on lived personal experiences is minimized and interpreted as not being important to such planning processes. We propose a stepwise community social work practice framework for increasing service user voice and participation. It describes: a) valuing the voices of service users; b) mandating service user participation; c) building more effective structures for service user participation; d) legitimizing service user voice; and e) listening actively in order to empower service user voice within this overall process. Our main assumption is that service user participation in community planning can become a more mutually beneficial reality only when service users and providers can authentically enter more open and positive dialogue exchanges, that may evolve to a more

equitable sharing of the so-called expert role. The Current State of Service User in Community Planning for Services

Despite increased social policies and legislation in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States that encourage local service user expertise, the amplification of service user voice and respect for authentic service user participation in local community planning is replete with many challenges (Carr, 2012). These so-called top down directives often result in tokenism, with subsequent trivialization or a so-called non-voice (Bee et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Dowding & John, 2011).

The profession of social work promotes social justice and seeks to reduce marginalization and oppression and is ideally suited to promote and direct the inclusion of service user voice in local community planning. Social work knowledge and skills may be utilized to privilege the voice of service users, thus empowering them to share their lived experiences and to authentically participate in decision-making about local services that ultimately affect their community and quality of life (Golightley & Holloway, 2018).

We need to determine whether our community service users are socially deemed as “outsiders” in local community planning efforts. Indeed, despite policy agendas mandating local service user participation, the truth is that there are few instances where service users have any decision-making power in local planning processes. The rhetoric of service user importance often cloaks underlying community power dynamics where service providers only offer token voice. This presents as an opportunity for social workers to provide leadership by creating unique ways to incorporate more service user voice in their communities. In turn, it becomes necessary for social workers to recognize that service user voice can only be legitimized and respected by a joint chorus of service user and

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provider voices.

In this context, it is not only social workers but other community professionals who must include service users as authentic partners in social planning. As such, when community professionals are required to include service users as authentic partners in planning processes, the conflicting priorities of service users and providers require explicit rules of engagement and more role clarity (Jinks et al., 2015; Savaya et al., 2018). This transformation in the service provider role requires both proactive unlearning and abandoning traditional paternalistic approaches and substituting them with more democratic, authentic, inclusive and transparent participatory relationships. Thus, by initiating a community practice approach with service providers, social workers can encourage service providers to positively change and re-frame their perceptions about local service user knowledge and expertise.

Incorporating Authentic Service User Voice in Community Planning: A Five-Step Approach

This community social work practice approach was developed by extracting selected topical data regarding service user participation from four research studies on local collaborative networks conducted in Canada, the United States, and Scotland (Dunlop, 2009, 2007, 2006, 2002). These data showed that both mandatory service user participation and joint and parallel planning processes for service users and providers were distinguishing elements, that supported increased service user voice and authentic involvement in local planning. These studies led to the development of a community development planning framework that originally outlined eight steps for authentic service user participation in local community planning (Dunlop & Holosko, 2016).

Subsequently, we extracted the elements of service user voice from these eight-steps to explicate the importance of amplifying service user voice to equalize power dynamics in service user/provider planning groups. We recognize the page limitations [of these notes] from the field paper and offer a shorter five-step planning process described herein. We contend that this holds educational value for social workers and other professions devoted to increasing service user voice and decision-making in local

communities. (See Figure 1 pg 62).

Step 1: Valuing of Consumer Voice

In terms of maximizing service user voice and creating more level playing fields, [see Figure 1, pg 62], it is initially important to be mindful that many service users are entering relatively unfamiliar territory when they are selected to engage with service providers in local community planning initiatives. In part, this is because service providers are likely to be more familiar with the overall history and terrain of the local planning domain. For instance, they often better understand the language, demographic trends, culture, planning processes, stakeholder relationships, and the influence of local politics on community decision-making. Consequently, service users appear to be still at the starting line with no clear pathway for their participation due both to their perceived outsider status and the likely technical/informational types of communication often used by local service providers (Savaya et al., 2018).

Step 2: Mandated Participation

When government mandates support the inclusion of service users in local planning and provide dedicated funding for recruiting and maintaining service user participation, more positive and successful relationships may be developed (Brand et al., 2010). Thus, it is important that social workers are educated specifically in community practice approaches that facilitate working more effectively with service users by developing ways of promoting more democratic participation in service user/provider planning groups. Where no mandate exists for service user participation, it often appears that there is a conscious avoidance behavior used by service providers of the need for service user participation, and local planning evolves without the experiential knowledge of service users.

It also must be acknowledged early on that service user participation as a policy initiative has had a bumpy implementation history despite its being mandated. Community practice approaches can operationalize service user participation in local communities by working to overcome the attitudinal barriers of service providers. At the same time, community social work practitioners can transform service user involvement by

providing more opportunities to learn about democratic decision-making and the importance of service users in local planning (Carr, 2012). This requires working more effectively with all community members; in effect, treating the community as a representation of service providers and service users who are collectively working together to promote advocacy and social justice (Kvarnstrom et al., 2013).

Step 3: Build Mechanisms

Policy initiatives for more effective service user participation should ideally include both the mandatory involvement of service users and the input of local community organizations. Thus, diverse levels of knowledge, experience and confidence can be explored, harvested and valued. In addition, dedicated funds to cover the costs of recruiting and maintaining service user participation can provide strong loud incentives to this end (Brand et al., 2010). For instance, by providing transportation, daycare, meals, and structuring meetings that meet service user needs in available time slots, local service user voice and participation becomes significantly enhanced.

Additionally, the use of specific sub-committees and task groups to facilitate the untapped knowledge and confidence of service users, should become an integral part of any such initiative. These organizational structures are established to highlight the knowledge and experiences of service users and help them purposely to become more vocal and inclusively involved. Community practice approaches are ideally situated to provide a parallel planning process strategy with service users going through a delineated planning process [see Figure 1] including making decisions for their sub-groups. Community practice can ultimately advance service user voice and participation by allowing service users to practice local community planning within more safe and secure environments to enhance not only their voice and planning skills, but to confront barriers and challenges as they arise in the planning process arena. Community practice approaches which include genuine community engagement, stakeholder analysis, group facilitation skills, community assessment, gap analysis, priority setting and intervention review, add much needed training supports for service user participation and enhance the contributions that service users

can make to local organizations and the community.

Step 4: Involvement

Community practitioners involved in developing service user voice and participation need to more proactively encourage service users to think about becoming more meaningfully involved in the overall planning process. By bringing in service user participants who themselves have received services in the community, the service user/provider planning groups can acquire new first-hand knowledge about what worked and what didn't, given the lived experiences and voice of service user planning members (Scholz et al., 2019).

Reflecting on the previously noted use of structures, community practice approaches need to fold service users into a learning orientation stream right from the beginning of their experiences with a specific local program. Although service users may need more specific and concrete programmatic directions at their initial entry, community social work practitioners must encourage and support service users as advocates for service planning in their local communities.

We have found that this braiding together of local programs and planning by service users is a unique and important contribution to increasing service user voice and participation. Being more valued as having expertise about perceived family and community issues, service users can be encouraged and supported throughout the overall process to be more proactive and forward thinking and join service providers to effectively advocate for change in their local communities. Recent research in the U.K. has shown that social work students who were involved with service users during their professional education and training, were much more comfortable with service users after they had been exposed to working together on specific tasks (Tanner et al., 2017). This direct involvement of service users in social work education cannot be understated as it provides the rationale for understanding why community practice approaches are important in this framework for incorporating service user voice. More pointedly, service user involvement in social work education has been part of social work education in the U.K. for approximately fifteen years, and has led leading academics to

propose that “social work education is richer and more relevant when it includes and learns from the experience of those who are on the receiving end of social work practice” (Duffy et al., 2017, p.127).

Step 5: Active Listening

Finally, this practice framework incrementally shows how service users can be brought into local planning groups as more authentic and legitimate and respected community partners. Further, using additional organizational structures, organizational learning models, ongoing feedback and, empowering and supportive strategies, service users can amplify their voices and truly represent the views and opinions of their families, friends and local community citizens. There is some issue with bona fide community representation in service user/provider planning groups, where accountability to service users was not factored into the planning process. In this regard, service providers should recognize the voice and concerns of service users and ensure that their representation is included in all policy and practice decisions (Scholz et al., 2019).

In what was referred to as giving teeth to one’s voice [see Step 5 in Figure 1], service users need to have more opportunities to demonstrate that not only can they meaningfully participate in decision-making, but they are ideally positioned as a cohort to lead and carry out local policy advocacy, when the opportunity arises. Many service users are currently evolving from stronger positions as local advocates who can negotiate legislative committees and representatives, and consequently influence effective local, regional and national policy change (Brand et al., 2010; Jinks et al., 2015).

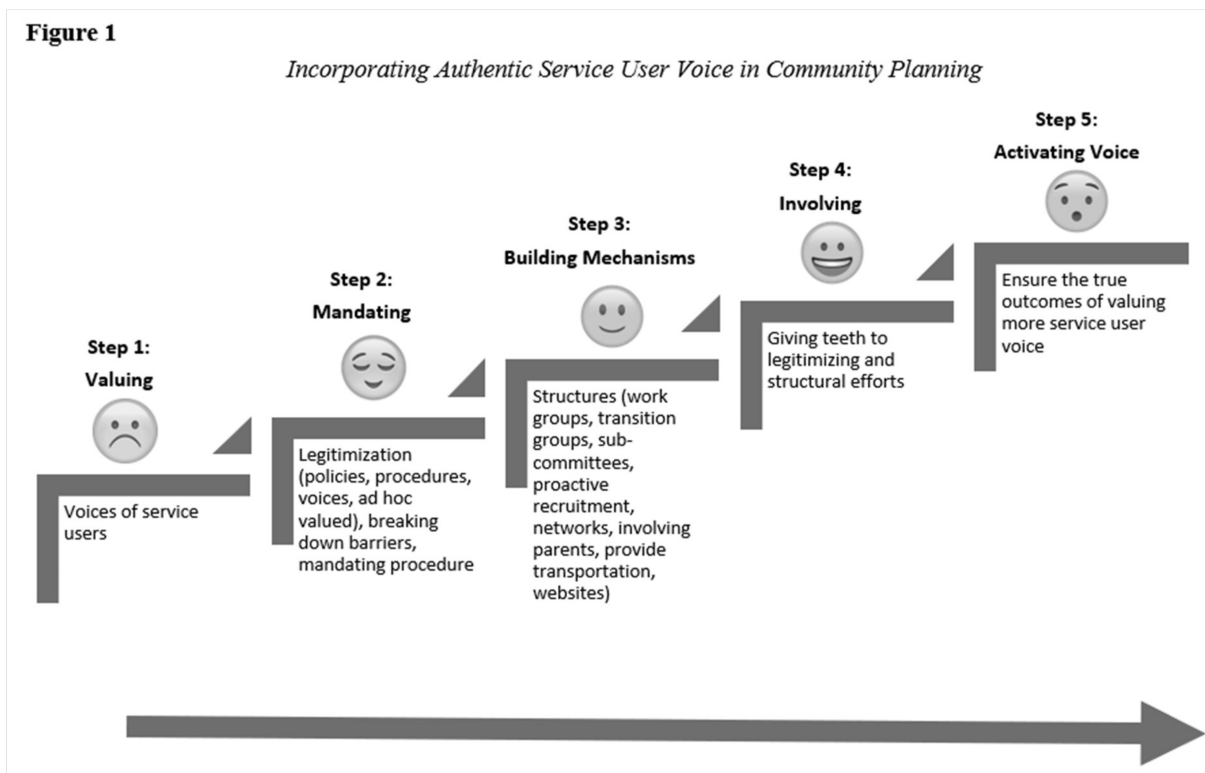
Concluding Remarks

Historically, service providers have used the excuse that service users are not interested in participating in planning for services, and/or do not fully understand the community planning process. This paper contends, that with more transparency and authenticity, proactive leadership, respect, and a philosophy of authentic partnership, service user voice will be amplified and they can and will participate in a more meaningful, democratic planning processes using the community practice approaches described

herein.

Indeed, a combination of factors contributes to the overall effectiveness of increasing service user voice and participation. The significance of macro practice competencies such as community social work practice approaches to building service user voice and participation in this paper cannot be underrated. When local community practitioners, such as social workers, devote more time and expertise to building service user participation in local service user/provider planning groups, they can transform the local landscape of many community services. As such, the profession needs more community social work practitioners who recognize the importance of relationship building and authentic listening to the voices of service users as being critical to improving authentic service user participation in local communities and elsewhere.

Figure 1



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