



Teaching, learning and assessing communication skills with children and young people: Developing the social work qualifying curriculum

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Background to the dissemination project

The project leaders, Michelle Lefevre and Barry Luckock, have previously completed a Knowledge Reviewⁱ for SCIE on how qualifying social work students should be taught and assessed on their communication skills with children and young people. That review produced evidence that this aspect of the curriculum remains under-developed. It identified that limited evidence was available on effective teaching and assessment strategies and that there was little in the way of shared views in universities in England and Wales on *how* to structure the curriculum or *what* to teach. It emerged that there was no guarantee that all students nationally would be taught or assessed on their direct communication with children.

The review authors were able, though, to develop a working definition of what constituted effective communication with children within the social work role. The project leaders have written two further papers on this matter, the first making broader points about curriculum directionⁱⁱ and the second proposing ways in which certain aspects of communication might be taughtⁱⁱⁱ.

The aims of the dissemination project

This dissemination project aimed to bring these research findings to a wider audience to enable social work educators to consider the implications for their own methods of teaching and assessment and to develop any plans necessary for further curriculum development. It intended to do so by holding two national workshops with a group of social work educators and other key stakeholders, including practice educators (practice teachers and assessors), practitioners, social work students and young people who have experience of social work intervention.

The first workshop

The first workshop day was held at the Tavistock Clinic, London, on 21st February 2007 and was attended by social work academics, students, practitioners, practice assessors and a representative from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE). It had been intended that young people who had used social work or social care services would be involved in the workshop but our initial plans to do so did not come to fruition.

The workshop began with an overview of the Project and the context and background of it. There was then a presentation on the findings and implications from the Scie Knowledge Review by Michelle Lefevre, Barry Luckock and Karen Tanner, three key authors of the review. This presentation is available on the SWAP website.

Participants were then asked to explore the following questions:

- Do these findings ring true for you?
- What do you think counts as skilled communication in contemporary social work?
- Should we seek to link the development of personal qualities and ethical commitments seen to be necessary to effective engagement with Children and Young People with acquiring appropriate skills and techniques?

Workshop discussions were then held on 'Successes and Struggles'. Social work educators were asked to explore and report back on what they feel works in the approach taken by their university and on any areas of difficulty. Students were to report on the strengths and weaknesses in how their programmes prepare them for this aspect of practice.

In the afternoon there was a presentation on 'Developing the Curriculum' by the workshop organisers. This was followed by discussion by the group in response to the following questions:

- What would a 'fit for purpose' curriculum look like (bearing in mind workforce developments in children's services)?
- Which teaching/assessment methods seem effective in practice?

The day ended with participants engaging in forming plans for their own feasible and effective curriculum development. Social Work Educators agreed to take the information and thinking back to their universities in order to disseminate it, review their programmes to see the extent to which they feel this area is taught and assessed effectively, and explore any implications for their own programmes. The powerpoint slides of the presentations can be downloaded on the SWAP website

<http://www.swap.ac.uk/projects/a-z/0607/commskillsunit.html>

Follow-up from the first workshop

Between the two workshops, following consultation with colleagues in their own institutions, participants were asked to develop concrete proposals for implementation in the coming academic year. A further workshop was planned for June 07 at which participants would report back on their plans for curriculum development, considering those opportunities and constraints which have arisen in discussions in their home institutions. It emerged, though, that few of the participants would be able to attend this second workshop due to its timing near exam boards. Participants also fed back that the process of engaging their institutions in discussions about curriculum development needed to have far longer timescales. With this in mind it was determined that the second workshop should aim to target, instead, new people who had not yet had an opportunity to hear or consider the findings from the Knowledge Review. Presentations were given by Michelle Lefevre at the Joint Social Work Education Conferences July 2007 and July 2008 to further intensify dissemination.

The second workshop

This was held on Friday 26th September 2008 at the Resource Centre, London, and was attended by university-based educators/academics and by practice teachers and assessors. As with the first workshop, the aspiration to involve children and young people in the day was once again thwarted. Some young people had initially signalled interest in participating but life crises had intervened and they had dropped out. Further young service user/carer delegates could not be identified in the intervening period. This issue was discussed during the day, with a general acknowledgement that the project leaders' difficulties in securing children and young people's participation in the day reflected the challenges to involving children and young people in learning and teaching generally. There are some examples of excellent practice in this regard nationally, but they often reflect the existence of particular user-led organisations in certain communities or particular funded projects. Starting new projects of involvement of young people from scratch was recognised to be expensive in terms of time and resources. Whilst great progress has been made with involving adult service users and carers nationally in social worker education, this has not been replicated across the board with children and young people and it was generally felt that this remains a priority area for development nationally.

The presentations began with 'Key findings from the SCIE Knowledge review and the implications for the social work qualifying curriculum' - Barry Luckock. Michelle Lefevre then discussed approaches to developing the qualifying curriculum, including proposals for a 'whole programme approach' which acknowledges that effective communication requires underpinning knowledge, personal qualities and ethical commitments which need to be taught across the entire curriculum, including practice learning. This was considered through a model of 'knowing-being-doing'. A further presentation by Michelle discussed a model for curriculum evaluation (developed through the Outcomes in Social Work Education project) and findings from evaluation of the Sussex University MA curriculum. Participants were encouraged to embark on the evaluation of how they teach communication skills with children and young people in their own institutions and to disseminate findings from this to strengthen the evidence base.

There were then two presentations by Social Work educators giving examples of how they teach and assess communication skills in their own universities. The first was by Liz English, Staffordshire University, with Tracey Johnson and Daniel Powner, who are 2 students on the Staffordshire BA programme. They showcased a particular approach to teaching and assessing communication skills through videoing students role playing assessments with real service users in an environment set up to look like a family home. The students discussed the challenges for them and what they had learned in this experiential environment that was different and useful. The second was by Caroline Leeson, Plymouth University, who discussed how issues relating to funding, commitment, adult concepts of childhood and the changing face of social work can affect how successfully children are involved in the teaching and learning of communication skills with social work students. Both presentations are available on the SWAP website. The day ended with small group discussion raising issues and dilemmas in developing these ideas in teaching and learning.

Evaluation and review of the project

Many of the aims of the project have been met. Many more universities are now aware of the findings of the knowledge review and educators have had an opportunity to think through the implications with peers and with stakeholders such as practice teachers/assessors, social work students and practitioners. Stakeholders who attended have been able to share their views and have these taken into account. However, the original aspiration to involve children and young people in the project was not realised and the loss of this was acknowledged with both workshop groups.

Projects like this reflect ongoing challenges for universities and for social work agencies: ensuring children and young people are truly involved and really have a voice in planning requires much more time and resources than may be originally anticipated.

A further aspiration of the project was that it would enable university-based educators to make feasible and realistic plans for curriculum development. The original intention to have participants from the first workshop return to the second to discuss their progress with curriculum reflection and planning was not realised. It emerged that universities needed much longer to begin to evaluate their provision and then to determine whether and what curriculum development might be needed. The challenges of including further teaching or assessment content in an already crowded curriculum cannot be ignored here and give weight to arguments for some kind of 'pathway' specialism in the final year of the generic social work degree.

A jiscmail discussion group has now been set up as a result of the project and it is anticipated this will enable further good practice and possible solutions to dilemmas and challenges to be shared.

¹ Luckock, B., Lefevre, M. and Orr, D. et al (2006) 'Knowledge Review: Teaching Learning and Assessing Communication Skills with Children in Social Work Education'. Scie (Social Care Institute for Excellence). <http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/knowledgereviews/kr12.asp>

¹ Luckock, B., Lefevre, M and Tanner, K (2006) 'Teaching and learning communication with children and young people: developing the qualifying social work curriculum in a changing policy context'. Child and Family Social Work. Child & Family Social Work, Volume 12, Issue 2: 192-201.

¹ Lefevre, M., Tanner, K., and Luckock, B. (2008) Developing Social Work Students' Communication skills with Children and Young People: a model for the qualifying level curriculum. Child and Family Social Work, 2008, 13, pp 166-176.



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