

A voice of reason

Genesis

The Group 'A voice of reason' came into being as a response to the requirement laid out in the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social work Education (SCIE) Annual Report 2003/2004, (Future Objectives: Theme 4; Developing Learning Organisations) to establish collaborative learning experiences for students of social work involving service users, carers and employers. Instrumental in the genesis of the Group was the involvement of the Debate Project, an existing service user group made up of care leavers. This ensured fullest participation of service users in every stage of the developmental process. Invitations to attend 'a big day out' event went out to all the services for looked after young people in the northeast of Scotland. As a result of this exercise the Group has a membership drawn from a representative cross section of young people with experiences of care and beyond.

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 SCIE (Wright et al 2005) This developmental process highlighted a number of complex issues including:

- How can young people be equitably involved
- Who takes the lead in supporting user involvement
- The need for significant energy and resources to be put into the process
- How the School of Applied Social Studies can avoid a tokenistic approach that is reactive to external deadlines
- How to promote a more sustainable engagement
- How young people can utilise their involvement to promote their personal development

The challenge 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 flagged up the need to address a cultural shift involving the School of Applied Social Studies in developing a 'whole system' approach (Wright et al 2005:12-13). The key elements of a whole system approach are:

- Culture: refers to the ethos of the organisation, one shared by all staff and service users, which demonstrates a commitment to participation.
- Structure: refers to the planning, development and resourcing of participation evident in the organisations infrastructures.
- Practice: 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: 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 fitting together as in a jigsaw puzzle offering a joined up approach with the focus shifting appropriately to reflect needs and priorities at any given time. It aims to avoid hierarchical structures which inhibit the fullest participation of minority groups.

In the past three years the Group has been involved in the following

- teaching inputs encompassing small group work, role playing for case studies and formal lecturing
- selection of students for the courses and assessing their readiness to practice prior to placement
- selection of staff
- delivering presentations and running workshops at a range of conferences
- developing personal skills with the Columba 1400 leadership Academy and a range of presentational skills. Most recently undertaking a recruitment campaign culminating in the 'big day out 2'
- contributing to the body of research in this developing field. Journal article to be published by the Scottish Institute of Residential Care later in 2008