

Walking in the footsteps of children and young people

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Abstract

This Research Informed Teaching Project at Staffordshire University brought together various key organisations involved in working with children and young people in order to present a conference at which the 'voice' of care-experienced and care-giving young people could be clearly heard. The project structured the conference in such a way that the content was determined by children and young people, thereby modelling a student-centred approach to Research Informed Teaching, so that key themes and messages could be identified for practitioners and trainee students to incorporate into their professional practice. A DVD of the conference has been produced to enable these key research messages to be incorporated into training, education and professional development courses both within the university and by the organisations involved in the project. Implications for teaching and learning more generally are also highlighted.

Key words Children; young people; young carers; social pedagogy; education; participation; hearing the voice of children and young people; conference planning; Research Informed Teaching.

Introduction.

One major challenge that faces education and training for both social work and other professional people-work agencies is to find ways to enable the voice of children and young people to be authentically expressed, and then to be taken seriously by students, academics and practitioners who are seeking to work with them. With every tragedy involving the care and safeguarding of children and young people that occurs, this need grows increasingly urgent.

The importance of the service user voice in social work education and training has been well- documented, both through the official degree requirements (Department of Health, 2002) and from the developing literature (Social Care Institute for Excellence, in full please 2004a; 2004b.2005, 2006; Huntington, 2006; Brown and Young 2008). Great strides have been taken in the involvement of adults in social work programmes: the adult Service User and Carer Group at Staffordshire University, for example, recently won the Community Care Excellence award (2009) for their innovative work developing social work students' interviewing and active listening skills with adults (Moss 2010; 2009). Many social work programmes would report similar success with involving adult service users and carers in their curricula.

When it comes to engaging children and young people, however, the challenge is more acute. There are serious issues of informed consent, comprehensive safeguarding procedures and the need for absolute clarity about roles and expectations to consider. The dangers of tokenism are clear, as are the risks of exploiting them, even for well-intentioned educational purposes. The question of how their contributions should be rewarded also needs to be tackled. These considerations must be taken seriously, but it is perhaps unsurprising that they represent for some colleagues major obstacles to involving children and young people in professional education courses, as the lead author discovered when discussing the project with a range of academic colleagues. "*It's too problematic, so it's best not to try*" is a plaintive, albeit reluctant, cry heard far too often from academics charged with the task of enabling social workers and other professional trainees to gain confidence in their work with children and young people. Or, as others would argue, "*it's best left to their placements where the experts in the field can give them the training they so badly need*". Without denying the crucial importance of supervised practice in the field, such responses clearly run counter to strong Governmental guidelines that insist that students' education and training includes listening to the 'voice' of children and young people, as well as the voices of disabled people and those recovering from mental distress, as part of the university curriculum. (Department of Health 2002; Department of Health, 2009).

This paper explores a Research Informed Teaching (RIT) Project undertaken at Staffordshire University which grappled with these key issues. The challenge was to enable the voice of children and young people to be authentically heard, and then to be 'captured' in an accessible way to inform and enrich student learning. This approach specifically echoes and responds to the plea by Bill Rammell, (former Minister of State for Life Long Learning, Further and Higher Education) that, 'we want all students to access the benefits exposure to teaching informed by research can bring'. (cited in Healey & Jenkins, 2009, p5).

The project was entitled *Walking in the footsteps of children and young people*, based on some creative initiatives already taken by the children and family social work team at the university. This initiative started within the module of the BA (Hons) in Social Work, *Every Child Matters*, where a key aspect of the teaching and learning focussed on children and young people's rights, and principles of participation and involvement within social care. It was felt by the Young People's Service Users Group that they would like the opportunity to have their voices heard and amplified within the early

stages of student social workers' professional and personal development, views which prompted the team's determination to seek Research Informed Teaching funding to take these issues further.

Developing the Research Informed Teaching (RIT) bid.

These initiatives, culminating in the successful gaining of RIT funding, encouraged the formation of a Research Informed Teaching (RIT) Project steering group, representing several agencies in the area served by the University who were engaged directly in working with children and young people. These included projects involving care leavers and care experienced young people; the Children's Voice Project; the local Children in Care Council; new developments with social pedagogy, and the work of a highly successful Young Carers' Project. It was further enhanced and enriched by support from *Involve/Evolve*, one of six pilot projects under the national Social Work Practice scheme arising out of the *Care Matters Agenda*, offering support and services to Children and Young People who are in care, or have left care. This group met on several occasions to undertake the ground-clearing preparatory work, and to clarify what were the messages already coming out of research that would provide some of the foundation material for the conference itself.

The pedagogic approach adopted for this Research Informed Teaching project, however, focussed less on published expert research findings, and emphasised instead the student as a participant in the research process. Healey & Jenkins (2009) highlight the rich complexity of undergraduate research and inquiry in their recent Higher Education Academy report. They draw attention to the value of students being active participants in the research process, engaging with research problems, and actively participating in the outcomes. This project similarly believed that for this conference the research would come directly from the experience of the children and young people. Their stories needed to be listened to and heard, and the staff and social work students' roles in this process involved facilitating the articulation of these stories. Later in this paper one organisation will describe how their young people engaged actively in this process, and the benefits that flowed from it for the participants.

Messages from Research

This approach does not deny, however, the importance of various messages that have arisen from a variety of other research perspectives into the experience of children and young people. One conference workshop, therefore, was dedicated to this topic in particular, in order to help everyone understand the rich complexity and importance of these themes.

Some of the key messages from research with young people (Crimmens & West, 2005) were encapsulated in the following statements:

"be with me, stay with me, and understand me; don't refer to me as a 'case', I am more than this; my life is not just about looked after children's reviews, pathway plans and personal education plans, I am more than this;

I want to understand my past, my present and my future; by doing this social workers and children's services practitioners who work with me can be more aware of my needs, and not just fit me into a box that needs ticking".

The conference took place, therefore, against the background of an already existing strong research base, with some key themes clearly identified. The purpose of this event, however, was to approach the issues specifically from the perspective of children and young people themselves, to enable them to speak for themselves, and to drive home to present and future professionals what the key messages were from their perspective.

Conference structure

The steering committee took the view, therefore, in line with the RIT approach that places students at the centre as active research participants, that the committee's responsibility was primarily to devise a format that would give every opportunity for children and young people to contribute actively and directly into the conference. They also wanted to encourage the social work students currently undertaking placement experience with two of the key agencies involved to play a part in facilitating these contributions so that they could develop their own research and facilitation skills as undergraduate students. Crucially, they also identified a care-experienced young person, now employed in a consultancy capacity, to chair the whole event. These key decisions meant that very quickly the onus for the successful delivery of the conference passed from the adults to the students and various children and young people. It needed their energy and their commitment to make the conference a success, and later in this article one agency describes and evaluates how their group of young carers rose to this challenge.

The conference itself was launched with a keynote address from David Crimmens, setting the scene both nationally and internationally, and introducing some of the key themes in social pedagogy (Crimmens & West, 2005). Social Pedagogy is presently being developed as a model of support and intervention with children and young people, and has been described as,

a way of working directly with children and young people where the practitioner (pedagogue) works with the 'whole' child or young person over a significant period of time in a close relationship that attempts to deal with the child or young person by occupying the same 'life space' (Pierson & Thomas, 2010, p.489).

This method of intervention is potentially the dominant model within Scandinavian and European Child Welfare provision.(Coussee et al, 2010; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Holthoff & Eichsteller 2009; Chase et al 2006; Lansdowne, 2006; Petrie et al 2006; Thomas, 2009). It is also an approach that lies at the heart of the work done with the Young Carers Project whose contribution is described later in this article.

Following this scene-setting keynote, each organisation then delivered a brief introductory 'taster' presentation about their work to the whole conference, before breaking down into separate workshops to explore their chosen themes in more detail. This enabled every participant to have a brief overview of the key themes of the conference before attending two individual workshops where these issues were explored at great depth.

The next section of this paper shows how one of the organisations involved in the steering group rose to the challenge of the conference, and the outcomes that were achieved.

How one agency rose to the challenge.

CASS (Carers Association Southern Staffordshire) Young Carers Project started working with young carers across Staffordshire in early 2000 to help promote the welfare and well-being of young carers and their families. In March 2005 the CASS Young Carers Representation Group was born, following detailed consultation with the young carers involved with CASS Young Carers Project,

'Young Carers are children and young people aged 5 – 18 years, whose lives are restricted because of the need to take responsibility for the care of a person (often a parent and commonly within a single parent environment) who suffers with a terminal / chronic illness / disability, severe and enduring mental illness, or is affected by substance misuse or HIV/AIDS.' (CASS, 2010, p.1).

All 25 members of CASS Young Carers Representation Group (CASS YCRG) are active young carers aged 11 to 18 years, who are carrying regular and substantial caring roles. They agreed to come together to be the collective voice for young carers in the CASS service area. They have been extensively supported by CASS Young Carers Project staff to enable them to engage with appropriate training opportunities, in order to raise awareness amongst professional groups and the wider community of the role that young carers are fulfilling and the various needs that they have.

Messages from young carers.

Messages from young carers tell us that young carers feel hidden, not listened to, and not heard.

'We are all hidden. Just because I'm not over 18 doesn't mean I don't know what I'm talking about.'

'People walk in and out of our lives. Help isn't constant.'

'We act on behalf of the person we care for. But because we are young, they don't listen.' (CASS YCRG, 2010)

As a result of the long-standing and very positive relationship with Staffordshire University, CASS YCRG members were keen to work with them in a meaningful partnership, and felt confident that they would not be treated in a tokenistic or patronising way. The opportunity to contribute to the *Walking in the footsteps of children and young people* conference, therefore, proved to be an exciting challenge for the young carers' project.

Planning for the conference.

CASS YCRG involvement in the design, shaping and delivery of the conference offered young carers a unique arena in which to undertake further research into the experience and views of young carers, and then to springboard their messages into the conference by offering students, professionals and academics an opportunity to explore young caring issues in a supportive environment. CASS YCRG members were very aware of the luxury afforded by the protected time offered by the conference, and were keen to maximise the potential of this undertaking.

During several meetings, in evenings and Saturdays, seven CASS YCRG members came together with CASS YCP staff to research, discuss and shape a ten minute 'taster session' and a 1.5 hour workshop. They wanted to highlight the range of caring undertaken by young carers in the community; the pressures they sometimes face, the commitment and dedication they bring to their caring, and the challenges they face when trying to lead a 'normal teenager's lifestyle'. The young carers were keen to make the workshop as interactive as possible to help attendees explore their understanding of this often-hidden area of social work, and to maximise the learning opportunities for attendees.

To enable this piece of work to be undertaken by CASS YCP, Staffordshire University's Research Informed Teaching project funded part of CASS YCP staff time, local-authority-approved transport arrangements for the young carers, and materials needed to aid the successful facilitation of the CASS YCRG meetings, and members' attendance at the *Walking in the footsteps* conference.

In the spirit of the RIT student-centred approach being adopted for this event, CASS YCP staff were keen to enable the young carers to take the lead in researching and planning the content of the 'taster' session and workshop. They worked, in effect, as the CASS YCRG administration team, helping with technical support, writing risk assessments, coordinating transport, securing informed consent from parents / legal guardians for filming / conference attendance. Informed consent was offered by all seven CASS YCRG members as they were very keen to engage with the conference, and to contribute to the educational/training DVD that was an agreed output of the conference.

Participating in the conference.

The young carers were extremely excited by the university television studio venue chosen for the conference, with its battery of television cameras poised to film their contributions. Speaking to an audience of over 100 people is never easy, but each and

every one delivered their 'taster session' material with an enthusiasm that clearly had its own impact upon the audience. The two interactive workshops that followed the plenary session saw the young carers taking the lead, making sure that the various professionals actively participated in quizzes, materials and group discussion. Delegates commented favourably on the very effective ways in which the young carers had led the workshop, with one experienced social worker stating,

'This workshop has brought home to me the issue of young carers in a way that has really affected me deeply. I'm ashamed to say that I had not realised before the fantastic work they do behind the scenes, day in and day out.'

Outcomes for the Young Carers

Outcomes for the members of CASS YCRG who were involved were multi-dimensional. Barriers to higher education were broken down, as many young carers had not visited a university before, and certainly had never dreamed of acting in a university visiting lecturer capacity, or to feel they had engaged in research!

The level of enthusiasm and self-confidence in all the young carers who contributed to the conference was incalculable. They had been able to research, evaluate, design and deliver conference material, and to make their own voice and concerns heard. They felt afterwards that people had really listened to what they had to say, and had valued *who they were*, just as much as what they did, as young carers. They felt that in some ways they had put their organisation 'on the map', and realised that they had contributed significantly to the research mindedness and Research Informed Teaching ethos that was at the heart of the conference. These academic terms were not particularly familiar to the young carers, of course, but when university staff and CASS YCP team members explained to them that they had indeed contributed important messages to research knowledge, they began to burst with pride. This feedback ensured that the *Walking in the footsteps* conference delivered a significant 'outcome success' for the young carers involved, so much so that they expressed a genuine desire to undertake this form of consultation again. They had found the undertaking extremely empowering, for themselves as young people and young carers, and for the other 175,000 often-hidden young carers throughout the UK (Census 2001). Young carers who were involved in the design and successful delivery of the *Walking in the footsteps* conference had one question at the end of the event....

'When can we do this again?' (CASS YCRG, 2010)

The subsequent production of the DVD, which features the work of the CASS YCRG at the conference, means that the Young Carers' Project will be able to incorporate it into the various training events and presentations they organise, and to demonstrate the quality of the work they can do as trainers and educators in their own right. The DVD will also be a powerful tool to ensure that the young carers' voice will continue to be heard loud and clear, and will be an important feature for future conference presentations they undertake.

What next?

Everybody involved with the *Walking in the footsteps* conference was convinced that, however successful the day was undoubtedly acclaimed to be, there had to be a strong follow-up. Otherwise this 'one-off' success would soon be forgotten.

It was for this reason that a student-led company filmed the entire event, and produced a DVD of the conference for use in variety of educational and training contexts. The RIT Project funding had budgeted for the filming and the production of the DVD and the eventual purchasing of the copyright. This will not only enable the participating organisations to make use of the DVD for their own purposes internally but will also enable the social work and nursing programmes in particular to use it as a key tool for students to hear the voice of children and young people, and really to begin to understand what the key issues are. In this way the purposes of the project will be expanded and enriched, and the contribution made by the children and young people to one special event will cascade out to many more.

Educational Implications.

Jenkins & Healey (2009) talk about students being active participants in research, regarding them as potential producers of knowledge (p.7). This RIT project not only confirmed the validity of this approach but enhanced it by demonstrating that children and young people (in this case, young carers) can have a seminal role to play in the education and training of people-workers in a range of different professions. From a more general educational perspective, therefore, several key themes emerging from this project deserve emphasis. First, those responsible for the education and training curricula must ensure that they have the appropriate value base to enable this approach to work effectively. Respect for the contribution that others can make; a willingness to acknowledge their own lack of knowledge and expertise, linked to a role that is facilitative rather than an authoritarian dispensing of wisdom: these are crucial educational values that are essential to this approach. Secondly, it is important that a culture is established that will enable (in this case) young carers to feel not only that they will be listened to, but also to risk the commitment, enthusiasm and dedication needed to undertake appropriate research; to process their findings, and then to present them in an effective and compelling manner. Inevitably many young people will have been made to feel that they have nothing useful to contribute, and that learning means sitting still and listening to the 'grown-ups'. It can take a long time before a spirit and culture of trust can be established so that the wisdom and knowledge that is available in and through young people can be brought by them to the educational table. Thirdly, social pedagogy has some powerful lessons for everyone involved in this level of education. There are no 'quick fixes' here: if the voice of children and young people is to be heard in order to provide fundamental insights and knowledge for professional people-workers, let alone to enrich their learning, then time and energy needs to be put into establishing good relationships with the young people to help them feel valued, and to believe that their voice needs to be heard. Finally, this project reinforced Jenkins' and Healey's comment that such approaches challenge us to widen and deepen what we

understand by research. The young carers at this conference clearly demonstrated the ability to seek out, assess and present important knowledge and insights that were grounded in their experience. They delivered their message with integrity and passion, and by so doing make a profound impact upon those who listened. As a result there was as a *win-win* set of educational outcomes, whereby the decision to encourage the young carers to take the lead gave them a huge boost, and made the learning outcomes for all the participants so much more powerful and influential for best practice.

Conclusion.

This RIT project can claim success precisely because it located its research focus within the experience of children and young people, and structured its work in such a way to ensure that the 'voice' of young people was heard. Adults 'walking in the footsteps of children and young people' can only appreciate to a certain extent what each young person's journey is really like; adults who seek to empathise with children and young people can gain some insight into what such journeys mean and feel like to the young person. But nothing can replace, or be a substitute for, the authentic story that each young person can tell. They are the experts, however much the professionals may sometimes think that they, as professionals, know best.

Certainly the conference reinforced and brought to life many of the message previously heard from children and young people. Their need (and their right) to be taken seriously, and not to be treated just as another troubled and troublesome case, was clearly articulated.

But one further perspective, even more important than this, also emerged in the conference. The young people exuded vibrancy and resilience; they had so much to give and had such enthusiasm and commitment, which even some of their painful and at times disempowering experiences had failed to quench. They eloquently destroyed the myth of 'fickle time-wasting youth' that so perniciously invades common parlance and some adult attitudes. They showed everyone that, in many ways so similar to the social model of disability, the 'problems' lie less in the lives of the young people and more in the attitudes and barrier-erecting (and at times abusive) behaviours and expectations of adult society. Remove these, and our children and young people will fly!. That was the challenge and the message from this RIT project: and it reinforced the privilege and hopefulness that anyone seeking to walk in the footsteps of children and young people should bring to their work.

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Copies of the DVD : *Walking in the footsteps of children and young people* may be obtained via Lee Pardy-McLaughlin, l.t.pardy-claughlin@staffs.ac.uk

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