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Authors	Jenkinson, Hilary
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

WORKING WITH YOUTH AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK TRAINING - by Hilary Jenkinson

Introduction

Social Work practice has tended to be strongly associated with working with children and their families specifically around child-protection concerns. This focus is demonstrated by both the abundance of literature published in the field addressing issues of child abuse assessment and intervention, alternative care for children, direct work with children, and child development; and the strong child-centred approach reflected in social work training. While this emphasis is positive given the large volume of child-protection cases being dealt with by social workers, there is however very little attention given to an area of social work practice that is becoming increasingly significant, particularly in the Irish context; namely working with adolescents. Social work with adolescents occurs in a variety of settings, the principal ones being The Probation and Welfare Service, Adolescent Psychiatric Services and Health Board Social Work. For the purpose of this paper we will focus on the Health Board setting as it is in this context that there have been the most significant changes in recent years in terms of working with the older adolescent age group.

This paper will examine the implications of the 1991 Child Care Act which significantly widens the target group of Health Board Social Workers to include young people aged 16-18 years. Given this substantial addition to the clientele of Child Protection Workers I will explore some of the difficulties experienced by social workers in working with this client group and the implications this increase has for Social Work Education. I will look at how social work training can equip workers to

work effectively with young people, and what a professional curriculum would need to contain in order to provide workers with the skills and competencies needed to provide a professional service to this target group.

1991 Child Care Act

The implementation of the 1991 Child Care Act has had a momentous impact on Child Protection policy and procedure in Ireland; not least because it increases the target group of Community Care Social Work to include young people aged 16 and 17 years:

> "'child' means a person under the age of 18 years other than a person who is or has been married" (Child Care Act, 1991 Section Two).

In reality this means a 12.35% increase in the target population of Health Board Social Workers (Clarke 1991). Responding to adolescents of this age is in many ways qualitatively different than responding to the needs of children or even younger teenagers and requires specific skills and knowledge appropriate to this age group.

Other sections of the Act that are particularly relevant to older adolescents are sections 5 and 45. Section 5 requires that the Health Board provides suitable accommodation for homeless young people (who are often within this age bracket), and section 45 refers to the provision of after-care services for the teenager leaving care. According to Clarke, policy on after-care should include, a place to live, sufficient money to live on, competence to look after oneself, companionship from a peer group, supporting and caring adults to turn to, a purpose in life, and a sense of identity (1991 p15).

So we see on the basis of this legislation, the remit of Child-Protection social work in relation to this age group has expanded significantly both in terms of numbers and nature of responsibility.

Difficulties in working with this Age Group

> "Helping adolescents is a task calculated to put any social worker on his (or her) mettle" (Laycock 1970 p.1).

Many workers find working with this age group a difficult or an onerous task, or possibly one that they would prefer to avoid altogether. These are not unusual sentiments as according to Josselyn:

> "Counselling adolescents can be the most challenging, the most frustrating and the most baffling experience a worker can have" (in Pritchard 1980 p.209)

The issue of working with adolescents is a complex and multifaceted one; an issue which I will not try to unravel in its entirety here. However I shall identify a number of factors which contribute to the difficulties experienced by social workers; these are: The nature of adolescence, unfamiliarity with problems associated with adolescence, lack of resources, and the conflict between a participatory approach and the social work role.

The nature of adolescence: "Adolescence" comes from the Latin word "adolescere" which means 'to grow up'. It is a time when a young person experiences rapid development in the emotional, physical and intellectual spheres. According to

Meyerson, “this period is accompanied by probably more changes than at any other time of life” (1975 p.41). It can be a time of major upheaval and adjustment for teenagers in general, so how much more so for those young people whose life circumstances bring them into contact with social work services? It is crucial therefore for social workers to have an understanding of the process of adolescence and the tasks associated with this phase of the life cycle. A lack of understanding in this regard can hinder the worker ‘tuning in’ to the adolescent and thus limit the effectiveness of the work carried out.

Unfamiliarity with problems associated with adolescence: Related to an understanding of adolescence is an understanding of particular problems associated with this time. When working with troubled teenagers one is undoubtedly going to encounter issues such as self harm, suicide attempts, drug use, and eating disorders, to name just a few. Often however social work intervention is driven by the immediate crisis (i.e. homelessness), and other “secondary” issues may be overlooked due to the pressures of a ‘crisis filled’ case load or perhaps a lack of knowledge regarding an appropriate response. Effective intervention in the lives of adolescents necessitates a degree of familiarity and expertise in dealing with such issues, or at the very least having the knowledge necessary to refer appropriately.

Lack of resources : Lack of resources is an issue affecting every area of social work not just the sphere of working with teenagers. However it is an issue which particularly impinges on the effectiveness of work carried out with this target group, especially in the area of homelessness. There are very few who would agree that putting a teenager up in a B&B for a night is an adequate response to their homeless situation; but in many cases these decisions are made, not on the basis of the

needs of the young person, but on the resources (or lack of resources) available at the time. Limitations placed on social workers regarding interventions can be the source of much frustration and disillusionment thus exacerbating the difficulties encountered in working with adolescents.

The conflict between a participatory approach and the social work role: It is widely recognised that the most effective work with young people is based on the principles of participation and partnership (Smith 1980, Staunton 1996, Jeffs and Smith 1987), whereby young people have ownership of, and are equal partners in the process. These principles meet obvious obstacles when placed in the context of statutory social work, where power rests firmly with the health board and young people certainly aren't equal partners in the process. According to Britton:

> "The policies and practices of local authority departments allow for only very limited participation by young people in what are often critical decisions about their future. As a result, many youngsters view the decisions made about them as arbitrary or unfair" (1987 p.35).

Social work departments vary in their commitment to participatory practice in relation to young people; however the greater the investment made in engaging young people as partners in the process the greater the returns will be in terms of effective intervention and successful outcomes. Developing this type of working relationship requires time; a commodity all too scarce in a social worker's schedule. However if working with teenagers is to be effective then the time it requires needs to be prioritised.

Implications for Social Work Education

Both the widening of the target group of Health Board Social Work and the inherent difficulties encountered in working with older adolescents makes “working with youth” a particularly important issue for discussion in the context of social work education. In the following section I will discuss what a curriculum needs to contain in order to facilitate the development of the skills and competencies needed to provide a professional service to this target group.

Focus Group Research

The starting point for our discussion will be a piece of research carried out by the “Practice Curriculum Review Group”; a group initiated by the Master of Social Work Course Team, Dept. Applied Social Studies, UCC, and includes all the course tutors, the fieldwork co-ordinator and a number of practice teachers. The purpose of the group was to evaluate the curriculum of the M.S.W. course by engaging with practitioners in the field regarding the essential components of a professional social work training course. The methodology used for this purpose was “focus group research” whereby each person in the group took responsibility for running a focus group with practitioners from specific spheres of practice, i.e. hospital based social work; psychiatric social work; child-protection work; prevention and family support services; adoption; fostering; working with people with disability; and working with adolescents. The aim of the focus groups was to ascertain what practitioners felt were the essential knowledge, skills, experience and values a person would need to have in order to work competently in their particular field.

The author facilitated the focus group on “working with youth”, a group comprising of five practitioners who had experience of working with adolescents in various social work settings.

Results:

The results of the focus group research will be discussed under the headings: knowledge; skills; values; and experience.

Knowledge: The participants were asked what knowledge they thought it was necessary to have on completion of a professional social work course in order to work with young people. It was felt that a knowledge of, and familiarity with, the following areas was essential:

- Legislation pertaining to young people, particularly The Child-Care Act 1991, The Children's Bill, and what legal rights young people have at specific ages (re voting, work, social welfare etc.).
- The psychology of adolescent development, including psychiatric conditions common in adolescence.
- Youth Culture; including the culture of specific groups of youth i.e. Travellers.
- Theoretical approaches in social work that relate to working with youth: i.e. Crisis Intervention, Systems Theory, Play/Art/Music Therapy, Client-Centred Approaches.

Skills: In relation to skills needed in order to work with adolescents the participants felt that it would be imperative to have the following:

- Engagement skills: the ability to engage with and build relationships with young people
- Communication skills: especially listening and understanding
- Working creatively through the media of art, play, music, etc.
- Groupwork skills; including different groupwork methods, i.e. using buzz groups, games, brainstorming, experiential exercises etc.

Values: When participants considered values in terms of working with adolescents, it was felt unanimously that most importantly the worker needs to know and have explored his/her own values. Other values considered vital in order to work with this group are: a non-judgemental attitude, unconditional positive regard, tolerance, and respect, especially respect for difference.

Experience: Everyone has been an adolescent. Participants felt it was essential for workers to be in touch with their own experience of adolescence. It was also felt that workers should have worked with young people in a supervised setting and had that work evaluated.

Discussion

The results of the focus-group research reiterate the importance of being familiar with adolescent development and particular psychiatric conditions associated with this time. Being in touch with the culture of adolescence (including one's own teenage experience) was also highlighted as being crucial when working with this age group, a point also made by Stainton Rogers et al:

> "If we want to promote the life opportunities of young people, if we want to help them prepare for their futures and make well-informed choices about them, we need to find out about this "new world" in which they live" (1997 p.26).

Closely related to being familiar with youth culture is having the ability to engage with young people. It is easier to engage with someone if we know the kinds of things that are important to them (for the teenager that may be music, clothes, T.V, football, friends etc.). Last year I was facilitating a session on drug awareness in a youth club setting with a group of 15-18 year olds; they were bored and didn't seem interested as we went through the effects of various hallucinogens and opiates. Then someone

mentioned Chloe on Home and Away who was taking drugs at the time. This had the effect of the discussion taking off with everyone having an opinion on the causes and effects of her drug taking and what she should do. It was a lesson to me about the importance of engaging with young people using a medium they are familiar with and interested in.

The focus group participants also emphasised the importance of having the ability to use creative methods when working with adolescents. Creative media are naturally part of youth culture i.e. fashion, music, dance, graffiti art, videos etc. Thus working with young people through such media can be far more effective than a formal interview situation. According to Randell, working through the arts is a powerful tool and can contribute significantly to the personal, social, and political development of young people. It recognises and validates young people's own cultural experiences but also creates opportunities which encourage them to extend that experience and so grow in awareness and understanding (Randell1989 p.3).

Conclusion

The knowledge, skills, values, and experience identified by the focus group participants should be key components of a professional social work curriculum in order to prepare students to work with adolescents. As we have seen, this is an area of work which has undergone notable changes both qualitatively and quantitatively, with the numbers of adolescent social work clients increasing significantly. Given this increase and some of the inherent difficulties we identified in working with this client group, facilitating students to develop these knowledge, skills, values, and experience should be a core aim of all professional social work training.

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