

Belgium literature review on service users' participation in social work education (2021)

Introduction

Belgium is a federal state, divided into several regions and communities, among which the Flemish community.

The Flemish community is responsible for, among other things, social work. In this literature study, we will mainly discuss the Flemish view on the use of service users within the social work programmes.

In 2018, the Flemish Government held a Social Work Conference. The social work conference of 24 May 2018, under the title 'Strong Social Work', takes as its starting point the definition of social work as adopted in July 2014 by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (Vandeurzen, 2018).

In Flanders, the government aimed to de-institutionalise the social work field. De-institutionalisation stands for the shift within care where the aim is to care for people with disabilities (physical, mental or psychological), the chronically ill, the vulnerable elderly, young people with behavioural or emotional problems, people living in poverty,... with all their strengths and vulnerabilities, to take a meaningful place in society and to integrate care into the community as much as possible.

De-institutionalisation also means committing to and valuing all forms of informal care. Supporting informal care is a task that is enshrined in regulations in many sectors. The decree on local social policy also provides for an important task for local authorities with support from the Flemish government. Deployment of experience-based expertise and the inclusion of experience-based knowledge in agogic processes at all levels are also gaining in importance. This means that social workers will, more than ever collaborate with and be supported by informal care providers and service users. This action point, among others, follows from the social work conference:

Educational programmes in social work give place in their curricula to competence development of professionals in working with, coaching and supporting volunteer and service users.

Social work education in Flanders

In Flanders, social work education is organised in university colleges that deliver professional bachelors degree programmes. Professional bachelors can continue their study careers by entering a university for two more years to obtain an academic master in social work. Typical of professional education is its relation with professional practice. Students have to do work placements in the second and the third year of their studies. Another element is that institutions for social work education are also delivering services to society and are involved

in scientific research. To realise the threefold mission, institutes of social work education have to develop and maintain relational practices with their stakeholders: work field organisations, local governments and groups of clients (Cuyvers, 2013).

Method

EDS was systematically screened for articles reporting 'service user', 'user participation', 'social work', 'education', 'Belgium'. Articles in English and Dutch were included.

Karel de Grote University College in Antwerp: Service Users as Tandem Partners in an Educational Module

A project on educational innovation was conducted with service users living in poverty undertaken by the social work (15 students) and socio-educational care work programmes (32 students) at the Karel de Grote University College in Antwerp (Driessens & De Clerck, 2014). The project was supported by Bind-Kracht (Bonding/Bridging Strengths), a collaborative partnership of service users, who were living in poverty and academic researchers. The students perceived the participation of the service users as a benefit. The service users offered a glimpse into the worlds in which they were living, which enhanced the students' respect for their survival strategies, perceptions and experiences. The students learned a new way of looking at people living in poverty: as powerful people and as fighters.

Students of social work observed that the project had enhanced the realism of the course: the theories started to come to life, the cases gained a personal face and the students were able to practise working with real-life practical situations.

Students gave additional consideration to their manner of interviewing (92% $n = 35/381$), and they became more aware of pitfalls and strengths in communication (90% $n = 34/38$). They also learned to conduct a respectful dialogue with people who had experienced exclusion (84% $n = 32/38$) to suspend judgement and identified the importance of a respectful and authentic attitude. The exercises with service users also taught them to focus their questions more (see also Skilton, 2011), even when sensitive information was required.

The majority of the students (80% $n = 184/230$) reported that they had become more aware of pitfalls and the power imbalance of working with families in the delivery of services. They also learned to ask for and respect the opinions of parents. They gained insight into the ways in which youth services are perceived, in addition to acquiring more understanding for the reactions of parents. A few students offered critical remarks: they would like to have heard more positive, hopeful stories about services. The service users could have been more proactive and the feedback on their actions and manners of communication could have been stronger.

The feedback provided by service users was appreciated: they noticed different things, pointed out errors, stimulated discussion and showed how things could be done differently. The transdisciplinary working methods and the connection of various types of knowledge—theoretical frameworks, practical professional knowledge and the experience-based knowledge of clients—were explicitly mentioned as benefits. Obvious assumptions were broken and different frames of reference became tangible, thereby strengthening the empathetic capacities of the students. The service users felt that they had been treated with

respect, in addition to receiving recognition and appreciation. They considered it worthwhile to help beginning service providers find their way, and they empathised with the students. They nevertheless expressed a desire to do better the next time, by knowing more about the programme, the course objectives and the substantive topics, as well as about the requirements for good feedback.

The lecturers expressed a great deal of ambivalence and uncertainty. Some were concerned about the service users. They were satisfied about student attendance, the authentic dialogues and the stimulating teachable moments. All of the parties involved were convinced of the benefits of this type of collaboration, and the programme remains committed to continuing with the project.

A combination of roles that promotes learning: role of the service users and the expectations of the lecturer.

Role of the service users:

- bring practice into the classroom.
- service users identify opportunities that the students had missed and provided them with recommendations.
- In role-play exercises, they assumed the role of the client in a realistic manner and offered students safe opportunities to practise.
- the service users did not assess work or assign marks. This ensured an open and safe dialogue.

Role of the lecturer:

- Student emphasised the importance of the facilitating role of the lecturer. In the beginning, it was important to introduce the service users properly, specifying their role and expectations clearly and identifying ground rules for cooperation.
- The lecturer supported the service users and enhanced their strengths.
- Lecturers also needed additional skills in coaching and diplomacy, in interviewing, mediation, caring, flexibility and integrity to work in tandem with service users

Organisational Conditions for Successful Collaboration:

- The size of the training groups in the social work programme (maximum 15 students per group)
- For lecturers and service users, additional time was required for preparation and debriefing. For tandem teaching, it is important for both actors to be well attuned to each other, to be sufficiently familiar with each other and to be able to trust each other
- The support from Bind-Kracht proved essential. Bind-Kracht provided a pool of service users. In Bind-Kracht, the service users had the opportunity to participate and practice in training programmes in small groups, in which they could support each other. Bind-Kracht also ensured that all of the service users received volunteer contracts, permission to perform volunteer work and insurance during their activities, in addition to making sure that their volunteer payments were paid as quickly

Added value for the social work education

The service users expand the approach of problems in a way lecturers and social workers cannot reach alone (Cuyvers, 2013).

Position of the service user

In one organisation, the service user is called in as a volunteer. Elsewhere, a full-time contract is offered. The salary, however, is lower than that of the professional doing the same work. In some organisations a full-time contract is offered. The salary, however, is lower than that of the professional doing the same work. Service users lack a clear statute that defines their position, rights and duties. As a result, they are vulnerable because they are at the mercy of the goodwill of organisations (Kinnaer, Scheepers, Dens, & Van Roey, 2019).

References

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