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Making a Difference for the Future: The Views of Educators by Experience about their Involvement in Social Work Education

Lonbay, S.P^{1*}., Brandon, T^{2.}., & O'Driscoll, S^{3.}

Affiliations:

¹*School of Social Sciences, University of Sunderland.*

²*Department of Social Work, Education, and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University¹*

³*Department of Social Work, Education, and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University
and Recoco, Newcastle Upon Tyne.*

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Sarah Lonbay. Email: Sarah.Lonbay@sunderland.ac.uk/

Twitter: @SarahLonbay/ ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-5122-9505

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Abstract

The involvement of people with lived experience of social work intervention is a crucial aspect of social work education and is firmly embedded in social work programmes within the UK. The benefit of such involvement by ‘Educators by Experience’ for students is well documented. For example, learning directly from people with lived experience can help students to develop their knowledge and skills. However, the benefit and impact of involvement for Educators by Experience is less well explored. This qualitative project aimed to understand why people with lived experience choose to become involved in social work education and how they felt about their involvement. 12 semi structured interviews were undertaken and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed the motivations for people’s involvement as well as a range of benefits that people experience as a result of this work. The paper highlights the support and ongoing work that is required in order to support the meaningful involvement of Educators by Experience in social work education.

Keywords: Educators By Experience, Expert By Experience, service users and carers, social work education, social work, identity, involvement

Subject classification codes: social work, social work education

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Dr. Sarah Lonbay is an Associate Professor in Social Sciences and Engagement at University of Sunderland.

Professor Toby Brandon is a Professor in Mental Health and Disability at Northumbria University.

Mr. Steve O'Driscoll is the Chair of the Educator by Experience Committee at Northumbria University and a Development Worker at Recovery College Collective (Recoco), Newcastle.

Making a difference for the future:

The views of Educators by Experience about their involvement in Social Work education

Introduction

The involvement of people with lived experience of social work in social work education has been a requirement in the UK for several decades now. Social Work England (the governing body) requires that Educators by Experience (EbE)² be involved within admissions and that “social work courses must be governed resourced, and managed using effective and transparent processes in collaboration with employers *and people with lived experience of social work*” (Social Work England, 2021, emphasis added). This means that it can be argued that EbEs should be involved in all aspects of social work programmes, including programme design and development, admissions, teaching, and assessment. Such practices are now firmly embedded within Higher Education Institutions (in the UK) who run social work programmes and courses within England are financially supported by funding from the Department of Health and Social Care to HEIs delivering pre-qualifying social work programmes (though the funding is limited and has not been increased, despite rising costs). Despite this funding to support involvement, other required resources are not always readily available within HEIs and there is little guidance on how to meet the requirements to involve people in these ways. Additionally, funding is provided per HEI, rather than per course meaning that those who offer both pre and post graduate social work education experience additional budget pressures. As such, there is considerable variation across HEIs about how

² Educator by Experience is the term used in this paper to describe people who have lived experience of social work involvement in their lives who are now involved in the education of social work students (see Lonbay, Cavener, O’Driscoll, & Chappell, 2020).

they use this funding (and in many places the funding is not available). There is also variability in the interpretation of EbE involvement across different institutions, affecting the quantity and quality of this involvement.

Although there are variations in terms of how EbE are practically involved in social work education, the benefits of this involvement are clear with several studies demonstrating the value that EbE involvement brings to students in preparing them for practice. For example, Jury (2022) noted that students valued hearing directly from those with lived experience, Lambert et al. (2021) commented on how EbE involvement helped students to develop empathy, Li et al. (2022) highlighted the range of values that educators posit EbE involvement brings (including, for example, preparing students for placements) and Tanner, Littlechild, Duffy & Hayes (2017) cited a range of benefits for students which included gaining understanding of the real lives of the people with whom they would be working. Stanley & Webber's (2022) systematic review also highlighted that EbE involvement helps students to develop their knowledge and skills (including communication skills), their ability to link theory and practice, and their understanding and application of key concepts. It also helps students to question and review discriminatory attitudes. Findings from Tanner et al. (2017) also suggest that students' willingness to learn increased when hearing directly from experts by experience and that the impact of this learning also increased when they could relate their learning to practice. This has certainly been the experience of the authors who have all had comments from students about how hearing directly from EbE has been a pivotal moment in their education. It is clear from this research that having diverse teams which include EbE helps to ensure that social work programmes are responsive to the needs of the service users and carers and brings a range of benefits for students.

Social work is a discipline embedded in notions of social justice and rights for marginalized groups. On this, Gutmann and Thompson (2004, p. 9) assert that the “fundamental source of legitimacy is the collective judgement of the people”. EbE involvement therefore needs to be underpinned by principles and values of equality, empowerment, respect, dignity and a focus on rights. These are similar to values underpinning the social work profession which has its roots in empowerment and self-determination (Biestek, 1961). Indeed, the social work profession continues to be firmly linked to the values noted above (Social Work England, 2023) and Lambert et al. (2021) also noted the cross over between these professional values and the practice of involving EbE in social work education.

Within social work education, empowerment in relation to EbE may come from involvement in a space within which people’s identities can shift from ‘passive recipient’ of social care services to ‘expert’ in their field. Cameron, Moore, Nutt & Chambers (2019) noted that this shift can be challenging where the identity of ‘expert’ is forgotten or there is a reluctance to acknowledge it which can result in EbE being excluded from working as equals. This shift in identity represents a rising expression of affirmation and empowerment for often traditionally oppressed groups, but remaining in the identity of ‘service user’ can continue to dominate encounters (Cameron et al, 2019). The language used to express this changing identity is also significant; as McLaughlin (2020) noted, it is important to consider the ideological underpinnings of the language that we use. It is also important to understand when and how empowerment through involvement in social work education may occur. This is an underexplored area. The impact of involving EbEs is not well documented and, on the infrequent occasions it has been considered, it has generally been included and researched as part of wider work around the involvement of EbEs in social work education.

From this body of research there is evidence that EbE involved in admissions processes felt that they gained confidence, knowledge, and practical skills from their experience (Matka, River, Littlechild, & Powell, 2010) and Tanner et al. (2017) also commented on the “satisfaction” that people gain from developing social work through educating students. Branfield (2009, p. 16) also found that EbE valued diverse involvement and felt that their involvement gave them “insight into the professional’s world”.

It is clear from the existing literature that the contribution of EbE is key to the attainment of knowledge at HEI, particularly around professional programmes such as social work. However, despite the wider body of literature which has considered the involvement of EbE and the benefits for students (e.g. Askheim, Beresford, & Heule, 2016; Brown & Young, 2007; Hamilton & Fauri, 2014; Lambert et al., 2021; Morley, 2015; Robinson & Webber, 2012; Tanner et al., 2017), less is known about the views and perspectives of EbE about their involvement in social work education. The research reported in this paper aimed to address that gap by exploring the perspectives and experiences of a range of Educators by Experience. Specifically, the research sought to understand why people with lived experience choose to become involved in social work education, what changes they felt had occurred during their involvement, and what changes they would like to see in the future in relation to their involvement.

Methodology

The project was developed by the EbE committee at an HEI located in England with the intention of using the findings to further develop the work of the committee in supporting the

involvement of EbE in social work education. The EbE committee comprises members of faculty, students, and people with lived experience of social work who are involved in the social work programmes. It is chaired by someone who has lived experience and its remit is to oversee the involvement of EbE in the social work degrees. The EbE committee discussed and agreed the project aims and methods, including the development of the interview topic guide. However, limitations in time and resources meant that the collective decision was made for the academic lead to undertake the data collection to avoid anyone from the committee undertaking unpaid work. The analysis of the data and the write up of this paper was done as a collaboration between the academic leads for EbE involvement and the chair of the EbE committee. A qualitative approach was taken for this study. This approach was suitable as it allowed for an in depth exploration of EbE perspectives through a semi structured interview. An interpretivist paradigm allowed for the subjective world of participants to be foregrounded in the research; EbE's viewpoints and perspectives were of central importance.

Educators by Experience

Participants were all EbEs who were involved in social work education within the North East region of England (henceforth referred to as the Educator by Experience Participants (EbEPs). 10 women and two men participated in the research. All of the participants were adults and three of them considered themselves to be 'older' adults. The authors felt that it was not possible to share additional information about the participants without potentially compromising their anonymity. The language used in this paper was discussed and decided by the committee and so the term Educator by Experience (EbE) will be used throughout. This term acknowledges everyone as part of the teaching team through virtue of their experience, whether that be lived, academic, or practice based (see Lonbay et al., 2022, for a further discussion about language).

Information about the project was shared with the EbE network and those who indicated interest were offered opportunities to speak with the researcher before consenting to take part in interviews. In total, 12 qualitative interviews were conducted. All EbEPs had been actively involved in social work education at an HEI prior to and/ or during the course of the project.

Methods and analysis

Individual, semi-structured interviews were used to allow for people to raise topics and areas not previously considered. This is particularly important in relation to the desire to allow EbEPs to identify and define 'change' in their own way. Using open ended questions can reduce the likelihood of imposing predetermined responses on the interviewee (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol covered the journey into HEI social work education, perceived changes and perceptions about the causes of these changes, and next steps: the changes EbEPs would like to see occur in relation to their involvement. The data was collected before lockdown measures associated with the Covid-19 pandemic were put into place.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. An inductive approach to analysis was undertaken following Braun and Clarke's (2006) outline. This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, organization into key themes, reviewing, defining, and naming key themes, and interpretation. The initial coding and analysis was done independently by the academic lead. The emerging findings were shared and discussed with the co-authors of this paper, and the final themes were also carefully discussed between the authors to ensure a good 'fit' to the data.

Ethical considerations

Given the researcher's role in supporting involvement of EbE, there was a very high likelihood that EbEPs would already be known to the researcher. This was therefore specifically considered within the information sheets which clearly stated to potential EbEPs that they were under no obligation to take part in the research and that there would be no impact on their continuing involvement in social work education should they choose not to or choose to withdraw at any point from the study. Opportunities for all participants to ask questions was provided both before the interviews and also at the time of the interview.

Informed consent was obtained from all of the EbEPs who took part in the research. The appropriate handling of sensitive information was also carefully considered as part of this project. Whilst the topic itself was not considered sensitive, it was anticipated that EbEP's responses may include sensitive information such as discussion of the experiences that led to their involvement in social work education, or discussion about personal changes that had occurred. It was therefore important to ensure that interviews took place in an environment where everyone felt safe and where confidentiality could be maintained. EbEPs were offered choice about where to be interviewed and all of them requested to have the interviews conducted in a room on the university campus. The quotations used within this paper have been anonymised and pseudonyms (chosen by the EbEPs) have been used.

A clear message from previous work relating to the involvement of EbE in social work education is the importance of valuing people's contributions and offering remuneration for their time. Payment for engagement in research, however, raises several ethical dilemmas

including, for example, potential coercion into taking part and the commercialisation of the relationship between participants and researchers (Surmiak, 2020). EbEPs were not, therefore, offered payment for their time as an incentive for taking part. However, they were offered a £10 gift voucher as a thank you for their contribution and time at the end of the interview. Travel and other expenses (for example, Personal Assistants' time) were also covered.

The research was approved by XXXX's ethics committee (submission ref XXXX).

Findings

Within the interviews, EbEPs talked about their journeys into social work education. For all of the EbEPs this journey began with their own personal experience with social work intervention in their lives. EbEs shared stories about how they had first become involved with social workers. These stories reflected a range of diverse experiences, both positive and negative. For these people, the journey into social work education began with these experiences and it was a privilege for the researcher to listen to them. Whilst they inform EbEP's decisions about becoming involved in educating social work students, they are not shared within this paper in order to maintain the anonymity of the EbEPs.

Overall, three main themes were identified within the data; motivation for involvement (reasons for becoming involved in social work education), the 'hidden' benefits of involvement, and the support required for involvement. The following section presents these main findings identified following thematic analysis of the data.

Motivation for involvement

EbEPs had a range of reasons why they had first chosen to become involved in social work education, but a common aspect of the reasons given was the desire to change social work for the better. As discussed above, EbEPs shared their own personal stories of social work involvement in their lives and their experiences were directly related to choosing to become involved. The EbEPs wanted to be heard and to raise the profile of certain groups who they felt were not understood or thought about enough within social work practice:

“I thought it would help raise awareness amongst the social work students because it’s not always something that is a priority on the university curriculum” (Elizabeth).

EbEPs also wanted to change practice by developing students into practitioners. They felt that their involvement would help students to be *“aware that ... they had to look at the whole world”* (Janet) by showing them the reality of people’s lives and experiences and giving them a wider perspective. They felt that this helped to teach students to *“be more respectful of the person’s situation and to don’t think that you know it all just because you’ve read it in a book”* (Ellie).

Another motivation for involvement was about personal development and the opportunity to learn more about social work for themselves, which was linked to gaining a better insight into their own experiences (see discussion of the theme ‘hidden’ benefits below). Overall, whether wanting to share positive, negative, or mixed experiences with students, the EbEPs all identified that their primary motive for involvement was wanting to improve social work practice and *“make a difference for the future”* (Michael).

'Hidden' Benefits of involvement

All of the interviewees spoke, not only about their reasons for becoming involved, but also about what they felt they 'gained' from involvement. The hidden benefits of involvement encompass things which are not 'planned' and visibly noted benefits (for example, payment – although this is very important), but that people identified as being a valuable aspect of their work with HEIs. These discussions were generally prompted by being asked about what they felt had changed during the course of their involvement where EbEPs spoke about their own personal changes and development, following their involvement in social work education. These personal benefits included the joy and pride that came from being involved in education, the ability to turn a negative experience into a positive one, as well as a development in confidence and feelings of wellbeing.

The 'joy' of being an educator

The EbEPs shared their love of teaching and being involved in social work education with statements like Elizabeth's who said "*I have a role to play and it's an important role and it's a valuable role... I love being involved*" (Elizabeth). Comments such as this demonstrated the joy and pride of being an EbEP and many of the EbEPs spoke about a benefit of their involvement simply being the "joy" of working with students and seeing them develop their knowledge and understanding. As Cairo stated "*[I] get the joy of seeing someone like having a eureka moment and saying 'Oh I never thought of that!'*". This was linked by others as well to their overall enjoyment of working with and supporting the students and the sense of pride and fulfilment this created; "*...to be involved in that process and then see the student just grow and flourish and then go on to qualify in the community ... [it's] ... fantastic.*" (Michael). There

was a clear sense that EbEPs felt “*very proud*” (Cairo) that they were able to contribute to the programmes and to students’ learning and development.

Turning a negative into a positive

Another aspect of the benefits discussed was the opportunity to take “*negative experiences I’ve had [and] turning them into a positive.*” (Michael). This was echoed by Willow who said:

“*...you know for me a lot of my experiences in life have been quite negative, and it’s just... it’s nice to be able to have this chance to... it’s something that... I personally find really helpful and really beneficial and... and you’ve seen the growth ... that’s happened as well, yeah.*”

Related to this, participants talked about how their involvement in social work education helped them to make sense of and move on from their own negative experiences. They discussed how having a “*safe place*” (Michael) to share their stories could help to “*benefit people that have lived experience and [that] it normalizes a lot of our experiences*” and provides “*validation to what you’ve been through*” (Susan). EbEPs spoke about their involvement as offering a chance to “*think through a little bit*” (Mary) their experiences.

However, there was also acknowledgement that involvement could be difficult and that “*there are occasions when, you know, something strikes a chord and you might get a bit emotional*” (Ann). For EbEPs, their personal experiences led them into their involvement with social work education, but they also discussed the need to have time and “*distance*” from the experience in order to be able to share experiences within the classroom. They felt

that they would not have been able to do this when they were “*in the middle of it*” and needed “*time to calm down*” so that it was “*no longer raw*” (Mary).

Development of confidence

Other benefits that EbEPs spoke about included feeling more confident and the development of new skills and how this had led to other opportunities. Willow, for example, said that her involvement had been “*amazing for [her] confidence*”. Others made similar remarks and also commented that this had led to opportunities elsewhere, including other employment opportunities; “*And to me this has given me structure in my life, it’s given me employment, it’s given me confidence in all areas of my life, and I’m doing stuff that I so much enjoy*” (Michael).

Support required for involvement

Support for involvement was discussed in depth within the interviews. EbEPs noted some key changes that they had noticed within HEIs. These included better training being offered and also a general feeling that the university was more inclusive than it had been in the past. Overall, a number of important areas of support were identified within the interviews. These included formal support (for example, payment, expenses, training, and access to library and IT services), informal support (including, for example, peer support, and ‘ad hoc’ opportunities to chat), and support linked to communication (for example, accessible and timely information being shared). These themes are presented below.

Formal support

There were a number of areas of 'formal' support that EbEPs discussed and identified as being important. These included, training (peer developed and led), payments and expenses, access to library and IT services, having a dedicated person within the university who oversaw involvement activity, and opportunities for shadowing.

There were many comments about the new training that had recently been developed and used at one of the HEIs that the EbEPs interviewed had all attended. These were largely positive with comments such as *"I got a lot out of it... I did learn a lot from it... and I think it's a valuable thing to keep doing"* (Elizabeth). Comments about the training also included the positivity of meeting new people through attendance: *"it was really good because I've met quite a few people ... so it was a good experience"* (Carol). Having another educator by experience deliver the training was also commented upon as being a really positive aspect of the training; *"I think it's delivered in a way that.. [is] really useful and ... it's by people who have the lived experience so they're putting it across and delivering it in a really good way"* (Willow).

Access to payment, library and IT services was also identified as being an important part of the formal support that HEIs offered (including having expenses covered such as travel, Personal Assistant time, or childcare etc). It was important for some EbEPs to be offered the option of a voucher as payment and this was linked to unhelpful processes around payment and that vouchers would be preferred over *"having to put down all their details and then waiting for [a long time]... and getting sent off and all that"* and that voucher payments would be a lot *"easier"* (Peter). There was consensus that payment systems in HEIs were often not fit for

purpose and were problematic, with one educator describing the payment system as a “*black hole*” (Ann).

Informal support

More informal aspects of the support that were available were also identified as helpful. These included, for example, the informal peer support that had developed following the training sessions that were run. EbEPs had the opportunity to get to know each other at these sessions and many had exchanged contact details and would arrange to meet for coffee before activities at the university or would offer support to find the campus and teaching rooms, amongst other things. The social aspects of involvement were also frequently mentioned; “*there are so many other members in the group so obviously I get that socialization*” (Elizabeth). Opportunities to shadow other EbEPs were also an important aspect of support;

“For me, I like to see how things are done first, so when it was suggested that you could come in and watch ... how someone else was doing that ... that was a really good idea and that would definitely be... that was a plus for me” (Ellie).

Other aspects of more informal support that were important to people included the relationships between all EbEPs, faculty, and students. For example, “*mutual respect*” (Willow), being listened to and having “*my opinion [taken] into consideration*” (Carol), informal opportunities to have a chat with people, flexibility around involvement and feeling “*part of the team*” (Ann) were all discussed as important for involvement. The way that staff and students spoke to EbEPs contributed to people feeling part of the team and feeling that they were trusted. The relationships with faculty staff were therefore really important in developing a sense of being

part of the teaching team and this was started from the very first contact: *“and I’ll never forget when I walked up that path I thought, I feel so out of place. But once I got there the lecturers made me feel so welcome and the students did too”* (Michael). This was also related to how EbEPs sharing their personal experiences was received by social work students and tutors. EbEPs commented that *“staff and students put a lot of trust”* (Michael) in them and that *“the staff who I’ve worked with are very open and ... respect my opinion”* (Willow). The relationship with faculty and feeling part of the teaching team was clearly an important aspect.

Communication and accessible information

Underpinning both formal and informal support is the communication that takes place between EbEPs. This was commented upon frequently and particularly highlighted was the usefulness of having dates for involvement ahead of time, having information about activities coming from one point of contact, and having information about involvement shared in a clear and accessible manner. For example, one of the HEIs had developed a welcome booklet and a website which contained information about involvement activity at the university and other useful details for people which was commented on as being helpful; *“I was like oh I’ll have a look at that website and it was really interesting... it was well laid out and things and yeah it was easy to follow and easy to find information on”* (Ellie). Having a clear point of call in the university who oversaw involvement and was the main point of contact was also considered helpful: *“having the one contact as well because years ago you used to get emails off various people and it was ... quite mind boggling”* (Michael).

However, it was commented on that the reliance on email was not helpful and excluded some people from involvement “*there’s a lot more electronic stuff coming about... that in itself might put off some older people... in fact if things are always put out, you know, across the internet, then they are never going to get it*” (Mary). There was also a sense that even if you did use email, if you did not respond fast enough then you would lose the opportunity to be involved: “*people were missing out because they couldn’t access their email or they couldn’t access them fast enough*” (Elizabeth). Linked to this were EbEP’s comments about how not being given sufficient time to reflect and prepare for their involvement was very unhelpful.

Discussion

The findings presented above demonstrate the motivation that EbE have to improve social work for other people. The motivations of EbEPs to take part in social work education were grounded in a desire to improve things for other people, following personal experiences with social work. Fox (2020, p. 9) similarly reported that EbEs were motivated by personal experience and desire to become “agents of change”. It is also clear from this research that the benefits and value of involvement in social work education are far ranging, that relationships within HEIs are crucial in supporting involvement, but that there is still a lot of work to do to support the full involvement of EbE in social work education.

Ongoing issues for involvement in social work education

Many aspects were identified by EbEPs as helpful and supportive of their involvement, for example, training, shadowing opportunities, and clear and accessible communication and

information. The support offered is clearly valued by EbE, but there is still a lot of improvement to be made. Digital inequality, for example, has been highlighted as a key issue during the recent lockdown measures associated with the Covid-19 pandemic (Beaunoyer, Dupere, & Guitton, 2020). The recent increases in online teaching means that it is more important than ever to identify and address digital inequality within HEIs (Lonbay & Smiles, 2021). Equality of access is therefore important to consider and how information is shared needs to be carefully reviewed. This was also commented on in relation to the diversity of people involved in social work education, with educators noting that more needed to be done to increase the diversity of the group. This can help to broaden the range of perspectives included within social work education (Fox, 2020; Hughes, 2017).

There have been positive changes in this area of work, for example, some of the difficulties identified by Branfield (2009) such as a lack of training were no longer so relevant. Other issues, however, are still ongoing, for example, issues with payment and a lack of diversity among those involved. These issues were also noted by Fox (2020) who commented on the need to develop payment systems and by Goossen and Austin (2017) who noted a lack of change in EbE involvement and issues with payments. Commentators on EbE involvement in a range of health and social care professions, such as Happell et al. (2022, p. 696) also note the challenge of finding resources and funding for involvement as a “major” issue encountered.

These problems need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

EbEPs also discussed the difficulty of sharing personal experiences and the impact of discussing and sharing information about difficult experiences should be explicitly acknowledged. Education is not therapy, but hook’s words (whilst considering students) are of relevance here:

“While is it utterly unreasonable for students to expect classrooms to be therapy sessions, it is appropriate for them to hope that they knowledge received in these settings will enrich and enhance them” (hooks, 1994, p. 19).

Adopting a trauma informed approach within the classroom may offer a way to support people who are working with difficult topics (Cavener & Lonbay, 2022; Carello & Butler, 2015). There is scope to also explore such an approach in relation to work with EbE.

Supporting relationships

It is crucial to build in time to offer support in both formal and informal ways to people who are being asked to share personal experiences (Lonbay et al., 2022). Training is important in ensuring that people feel comfortable and able to be involved in social work education, but this research has also identified the ‘softer’, less tangible benefits associated with developing a sense of community and new, supportive friendships as part of this work. It is important to note at this point the impact that restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic have had on this area of work, including the difficulties associated with moving provision online and the knock-on impact this has had on the development of safe spaces and trusting relationships (Lonbay & Smiles, 2021). Feeling part of the teaching teams and feeling respected by other tutors and students was also important. Fox (2020, p. 13) also found that valuing EbE was an “important enabler for effective participation” and this is also reflected in other research on this topic which highlights the importance of collaboration (Cabiati and Levy, 2021; Tanner et al., 2017). Time and space to build supportive relationships is crucial. This can happen in an ad hoc manner, but created spaces are also important, for example, informal coffee mornings as an opportunity for people to meet and chat (author, date).

The motivation to improve social work and the joy of being an educator is something that most, if not all, of us working in this area feel and this brings us together as a united team. However, whilst issues with payment and other aspects identified above remain unaddressed there will continue to be a divide between those teaching through virtue of their lived experience and those teaching through virtue of their practice or academic background. This is linked also to the language that is used and the identity of EbE within HEI settings.

The value of involvement and the identity of EbE

While past research has identified the importance of training in ensuring that people felt comfortable and able to be involved in social work education (Beresford, 2013), our research has added to knowledge by identifying less tangible benefits of EbE involvement, such as developing a sense of community and creating new, supportive friendships. For example, EbEPs spoke about developing confidence and new skills and how this has led to other opportunities as well. Additionally, some spoke about how sharing their experiences was part of their own “*recovery*” journeys and had helped to “*validate*” their experiences. This occurred as much through sharing and comparing stories and experiences with each other as it did through their interactions with students. These interactions and relationships can help in the generation of “*alternative knowledges*” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 9), one way of addressing, to some extent, what Fricker (2007) refers to as epistemic injustice: “*forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices*” (Kidd, Medina, & Polhaus, 2019). The validation and developed understanding of their experiences is a form of ‘*hermeneutic justice*’ whereby EbE use these interactions as an opportunity to make sense of their own experiences through interaction with peers and students

(Fricker, 2007). This reinforces the importance of peer support and opportunities for EbE to get to know each other, as well as the importance of acknowledging and addressing underlying power dynamics. It would be useful to further explore this in future research.

Hutchinson and Lovell (2013) in their work on action research point out the significance, when working with EbEs, of reciprocity, being listened too and connecting with others. One of their respondents reported: “We have moved from being service users, to being researchers, a positive identity, which has motivated us all, yes we are useful...” (Hutchinson and Lovell, 2013, p.647). Within engagement at the HEI a similar trajectory of changing identity has taken place for some EbEs: starting their journey within the university as patients/service users/clients moving to being EbEs, and in the long term potentially becoming visiting lecturers. Patients/service user/client is the passive receiving of services, but being an EbE implicitly implies a position of status and active involvement and finally becoming a visiting lecturer or scholar is a position of authority and value. This also represents some movement towards epistemic justice; the shift in identity described here reflects a form of testimonial justice whereby EbE gain credibility as speakers (Fricker, 2007). This should be carefully considered within the development of this area of work; how and when the development of these ‘hidden benefits’ and shift in identity can be supported is an important question. For example, Sapouna (2020 p. 13) cautions against a “voyeuristic approach” which does not challenge existing power dynamics. Previous research has also demonstrated that where involvement is “respectful and inclusive” it can be beneficial, but involvement can also lead to people not feeling valued or respected when not done in a meaningful way (Meakin, Cameron, Moore, & Matthews, 2017, p. 6). The ‘hidden’ benefits identified within this research are very unlikely to manifest if the formal and informal aspects of support identified are not in place. This again provides further impetus to the need to address ongoing issues, discussed above.

Limitations

As commented on within this paper, funding and resources can be a barrier to EbE involvement in social work education and other activities and this is reflected within this research. Whilst aspects of the research (as detailed within the methodology) were undertaken in collaboration with the EbE committee, the data collection and initial analysis was done by the academic lead for EbE involvement and this was due to the limited funding available to support the research. This was a difficult decision, particularly given that it was made for pragmatic reasons connected to the availability of funds. Previous work with the EbE committee had highlighted the importance of payment and it was felt that it would be inappropriate for people to work for free. However, ideally, the research in its entirety would have been conducted as a co-produced piece of work. This was discussed within the EbE committee and the decision made for the academic lead to undertake the interviews meaning that this research in itself strays from the ideals that the authors would like to uphold. This is a significant limitation, given the topic under consideration, and it is important to note the ways in which it might have impacted the research. For example, it may have influenced EbEPs decisions regarding participation and what they chose to share within the interview. It is also meant that an opportunity for EbEs to develop skills in research was not made available. Others have highlighted the positive benefits of lived experience research; Honey et al. (2020), for example, noted that people who engaged with lived experience research found it 'hope inspiring' (p. 10). In future, it is important to ensure adequate funding for research of this nature to be co-produced. This should include funding to support active involvement of EbE across all aspects of the research and include funding to support training, should this be required. Additionally, this was a small-scale project designed to explore the area. Future research could include a wider range of participants to better understand the motivations and benefits of EbE involvement in this area.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to a steadily growing body of literature that discusses the involvement of EbE in social work education. This is a firmly embedded aspect of social work education now and yet some of the same issues and barriers persist. Payment systems let people down, stigma and language continue to marginalize people. This involvement is a crucial aspect of social work education and supported by a critical and engaged pedagogy which acknowledges the importance of dialogue about lived experience and developing positive identities alongside academic discourse in the development of capable and responsive social workers. This paper contributes to the wider discussion by providing further evidence about the motivations for involvement, the range of benefits that can occur when people are involved in these activities, and the support required for meaningful involvement. It is important to continue to build on the positive steps that have been taken and to further develop involvement in a manner that seeks to further enhance the benefits for EbE in the future.

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