

# Involving Services Users in Social Work Training on the Reality of Family Poverty: A Case Study of a Collaborative Project

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*In the last five years there has been an increased drive to include the perspectives and contributions of service users in social work education in the United Kingdom. In this paper we discuss the experience of one project that attempted to bring together service users, academics and practitioners to jointly develop and deliver a module that sought to examine the perspectives of families living in poverty who were in receipt of children and families social work services. Through doing this it was hoped that it would be possible to raise practitioners' awareness of how poverty impacts on parenting and how they could develop an approach that was non-punitive and genuinely supportive. The paper starts by exploring the context of service user involvement in social work education and then describes the development and process of this collaborative project. The paper concludes with recommendations for both projects seeking to engage service users in empowering and meaningful ways, as well as social work practice within an anti-oppressive framework.*

*Keywords:* Service User Involvement; Social Work Training; Poverty; Child Welfare

## Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing requirement to include the perspectives of service users in social work education. Social work degree programmes require the inclusion and participation of service users in the design, delivery and evaluation of the programmes but do not prescribe the form this takes (DH, 2002). A key principle of the new post-qualifying framework is the centrality of service user involvement

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(GSCC, 2005). National Occupational Standards for the profession (TOPSS, 2000, 2002) also reinforce this, together with the *Codes of Conduct for Social Workers and their Employers* (GSCC, 2002) upon which registration with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) is based. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) has sought to support this work at every level of social work training with publications and conferences that have brought together service users, educators and practitioners (Levin, 2004). This development in education reflects a wider move across health and social care to incorporate and promote the views and participation of service users. Both *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2004) and *Independence, Well-being and Choice: Our Vision for the Future of Social Care for Adults in England* (DH, 2005) stress the centrality of the involvement, if responsive services are to be developed that begin to work toward partnership practice.

Social work, it is argued, should be based upon a strong research-informed knowledge base. Therefore there have also been debates as to how this knowledge base should include the expertise of service users and participatory models of research with service users (Beresford, 2000; Bennett & Roberts, 2004; Humphries, 2003). Pawson *et al.* (2003) developed a classification system of types of social care knowledge. One of the five identified sources of knowledge is user and carer knowledge based on first hand experience and reflection on intervention. Beresford (2000) also makes a strong case for involving the knowledges and theories of service users and their organisations in the process of social work theory-building. He states that these 'alone are based on *direct* experience of such policy and provision from the *receiving end*. Service users' knowledges grow out of their personal and collective experience of policy, practice and services' (Beresford, 2000, p. 493). The focus on the voices of service users has therefore been about more than simply a representation and legitimisation of their views. The incorporation of service user perspectives has been central to the development of an emancipatory theoretical framework in relation to the social work role (Dominelli, 2004). This perspective recognises that 'There must also be some understanding of the links between people's personal experiences of oppression and the structural reality of inequality' (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995, p. 123).

This paper discusses a project with a group of service users who have traditionally had very limited involvement in social work education, namely families living in poverty who have experienced social work intervention in relation to their children. This was a joint project between ATD Fourth World, Family Rights Group and academics from Royal Holloway, University of London. ATD Fourth World is an anti-poverty organisation that supports families and works with institutions to improve the lives of people living in extreme poverty. Family Rights Group is an organisation aiming to support families involved with social services and develop and promote services that help secure the best possible futures for children and families.

In this paper we describe the process of service users, academics and practitioners working together to develop a teaching programme. We also consider the content of this programme and the contribution that families' experiences of poverty and being a recipient of social work services can make to the social work knowledge base. We

conclude by considering what lessons can be learnt both for future collaborative projects seeking to engage service users in empowering and meaningful ways, as well as social work practice within an anti-oppressive framework. We frequently use the term 'family member' when we are referring to a service user participant. Whilst recognising the term 'service user' is most often used to refer to people who receive a social work or social care service (Beresford, 2000), the participants in the project preferred to be known as 'family members'. As with some other service user groups they felt the word 'user' has connotations of being a passive recipient of services (Levin, 2004), as well as being a person who misuses drugs.

### Why Poverty?

People who live in poverty know the solutions to their problems better than anyone else. Asking their opinions and giving them a voice is essential if we are to come to any true understanding of poverty and what can be done to eradicate it. (Project participant—ATD Fourth World, 2005, p. 7)

Child poverty is a major issue for all countries across Europe (Pringle, 1998). The nature of the development of ATD Fourth World reflects this pan-European dimension. Originating in post-war France the organisation now has branches in most European countries. Internationally governmental responses in terms of child welfare policy have varied particularly relating to compulsory state intervention (Katz & Pinkerton, 2003). However there is a high degree of consensus in the child welfare literature that poverty and other forms of social exclusion can affect parents' *actual*, as well as *perceived* ability to care for their children in various ways (Fox-Harding, 1997; Pringle, 1998). There is a well documented and close relationship between poverty and a range of parenting behaviours, and poverty makes the task of parenting an extremely challenging one (Holman, 1999; Ghate & Hazel, 2002). Research on families involved with child protection services in the United Kingdom has consistently indicated that many families share the common experience of living on a low income, experiencing housing difficulties, and social isolation. However in spite of these structural constraints, the studies consistently and overwhelmingly demonstrate that the majority of these parents want what is best for their children (DH, 1995, 2001; Quinton, 2004). Brophy *et al.*'s (2003) study of racial and cultural factors within care proceedings identified the experience of living in poverty and social deprivation as being a factor common to most families involved in the family justice system, irrespective of ethnicity. Nevertheless Bebbington & Miles' (1989) study vividly demonstrated how the cumulative effect of socio-economic disadvantage dramatically increases a child's chances of coming into the care system, particularly when associated with other stressors such as racism and the impact of disability on family life. Recent reports show that despite a decade of government policies explicitly designed to improve outcomes for children, especially in terms of eradicating poverty and reducing social exclusion, there is still a continuing strong association between child poverty, ethnicity and disability (Chamba *et al.*, 1999;

Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Palmer *et al.*, 2005). Ivaldi (2000) found that 89% of birth mothers whose child was subsequently adopted were living in poverty, and confirmed that children permanently separated from their birth families are predominantly children of the poor. The relationship between poverty and parenting is a complex one, and poverty impacts differentially on individual families, with particularly serious consequences for more vulnerable individuals, or for those who are less resilient (Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Quinton, 2004).

Despite poverty and social exclusion being common characteristics of families involved in the child protection system and a key factor associated with children becoming looked after, poverty has received limited discussion on many social work training courses outside the confines of the social policy lectures. Training on discrimination and oppression has tended to focus on other issues such as gender, race and disability. There is evidence to suggest that social workers struggle to truly incorporate an understanding of the impact of poverty in their assessments and interventions (Lymbery, 2001). Studies of the attitudes of social workers to poverty and poor people have revealed ambivalence, confusion and lack of awareness or 'poverty blindness' (Becker, 1997; Dowling, 1999). The ecological approach, which underpins the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH, 2000), requires attention to be paid to environmental factors such as income, employment and housing. However, in practice, social workers and other professionals continue to struggle to make sense of the complex interplay between poverty, social deprivation, parental capacity and children's development and these elements are often missing or not considered in sufficient depth (Jack & Gill, 2003; Cleaver *et al.*, 2003).

Jordan (2004) argues that social work finds itself in an ambivalent position to the question of the relationship between the individual, the family and the state. On the one hand it has been at the 'cutting edge' of collective welfarist responses to issues relating to poverty and social justice. On the other hand, particularly over the last 25 years, social work in the United Kingdom, with its roots in nineteenth century individual liberalism, has increasingly accommodated the current government's emphasis on individual responsibility, with its potentially social authoritarian implications, or as Jordan (2001) puts it 'tough love'. Put simply social work practice which fails to see the impact of ecological factors on family life, can understand parental behaviour through the prism of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

Conversely this project developed out of a fundamental belief that many, if not most, families who come into contact with statutory social services do so on the basis of the *effects* on family life of living in chronic poverty. All of the parties involved in the project recognised that there are occasions when professionals need to intervene to safeguard children's welfare, including in extreme cases the removal of children to substitute care. A shared desire to contribute to understanding the impact of poverty and improving service delivery provided an impetus for undertaking this project. Beresford (2000) when considering the involvement of service users in developing social work theory, stresses the importance of accessing the subjective knowledges, analyses and perspectives of people included in the range of social care categories, and

challenging the conventional reluctance of engaging with those defined as 'undeserving'. A political and policy context that has continued to adopt a predominantly 'individual pathology' oriented organisational and professional perspective to child protection work (Jack & Gill, 2003), has served to marginalise the perspectives of parents in relation to both their experience of service delivery, as well as how poverty frames their lives and influences their capacities as parents. Family members involved in this project were seen as contributing their knowledge and expertise as both recipients of children's social work services as well as parents struggling to raise their children in circumstances of chronic poverty. The overall aim of the project was therefore to build an understanding between families living in poverty who have received social work services, social work academics and practitioners in order to jointly develop and deliver teaching that increases awareness of the impact of poverty on children and families, and the services necessary to improve the quality of their lives.

### **Organisation of the Project**

A steering group with representatives from the three partner organisations was established and met on numerous occasions to develop the aims and methods; seek funding; and think through the practicalities of implementing the project. This was an important and time-consuming process, both in terms of securing sufficient funding, as well as developing a shared commitment to the aims and methods agreed. The Gulbenkian Foundation, Department of Health, SCIE, and the Social Work and Social Policy Learning and Teaching Support Network (SWAPItsn) provided funding for the project.

In order to facilitate the achievement of the project's aims, a working group was established comprising of 10 family members who were living in poverty and who had experienced social work intervention in relation to their children; two academics from Royal Holloway; two social work practitioners; a social work manager; and representatives from ATD Fourth World, Family Rights Group and one each from SCIE and the Department of Health. It was essential that family members were maintained as the central focus of the project, and provided with additional support, preparation time and confidence to participate fully in the meetings with the professionals. The plan implemented was that the working group should meet on six occasions at eight week intervals. In the morning the family members would meet with support workers from ATD Fourth World and the representative from Family Rights Group and one from Royal Holloway. In the afternoon the remaining working group members would join for an 'all-together' group meeting. In between these days family members would meet with support workers from ATD Fourth World every four weeks and telephone contact was maintained. This additional support time proved invaluable and served to build group cohesion, mutual support and a shared ownership of the project.

In terms of approaching and seeking agreement from family members to become involved in the project, two of the organisations had already established trusting

relationships with service users. ATD Fourth World, in particular, works in partnership with people living in long-term poverty, the majority of whom have experience of social services intervention. It was essential that a diverse range of family member participants was approached, and through Family Rights Group's links with community organisations particular effort was made to recruit family members from minority ethnic communities. About half of the group were from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately in relation to gender we were not so successful, and only one family member was male.

A number of practical issues had to be thoroughly thought through prior to the commencement of the project. It is essential that all service user participants in developmental work and training be remunerated for their expertise and time, just as professionals are (Levin, 2004). It was particularly important that for this project on poverty, participants' benefits were not affected. The options were discussed with family members and it was agreed that they would receive high street vouchers from ATD Fourth World following every session. In addition travel and child care costs were reimbursed in cash on the day, in recognition that people living on benefits cannot be expected to wait for a cheque to be sent in the post. All the meeting times took account of the need of a number of participants to take and collect their children from school.

Each of the six sets of working group meetings had a different focus. Small group work formed significant parts of these meetings in order to enable less confident family members to participate. As one participant explained:

Working in small groups was helpful because everybody could speak, but I also liked working in a big group because this gave me the confidence to speak in public. I have a lot of anger inside me towards social workers, because of the way I was treated. I want to be seen as an individual who has views and opinions. (ATD Fourth World, 2005, p. 13)

Attention to process and relationships was a central tenet of the project, both in terms of the work of the project group itself, as well as messages for social workers about the importance of partnership based practices. An important part of the first set of meetings was for participants to reflect on their feelings about working with other group members and their personal reasons for being involved. This process assisted all participants to feel ownership of the project. Much of the discussion in the middle sets of meetings explored what needed to be included in the content of the teaching. The fifth set of meetings was specifically focussed on building family members' confidence, assertiveness and training skills. This was an important component of the project that helped family members manage the transition from project-based work in a relatively safe environment to a teaching session with, on occasions, hostile social work practitioners. The final set of meetings was devoted to evaluating the project as a working group. The project also had a final ending activity for family members and their children—a trip to the seaside.

The steering group agreed, prior to the commencement of the project, to engage someone to participate in the all-together group sessions, observe, take notes and have responsibility for co-ordinating the evaluation and editing the final report. The

final report on the project is available online at [www.atd-uk.org](http://www.atd-uk.org) and [www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk). The teaching was piloted on the Post Qualifying Child Care Award run by Royal Holloway, London University and family members have continued to deliver the training on this and other qualifying and post qualifying social work programmes. Although less frequent, family members continue to meet with ATD Fourth World support staff and academics from Royal Holloway to plan and evaluate the teaching sessions as well as develop their training skills and explore alternative ways of becoming involved in social work education, training and service delivery.

### Content of the Teaching

An overwhelming message coming from the group was that poverty is not just about lack of money, but also the consequent impact on people's dignity and self-respect. When discussing how poverty affects family life, participants identified a range of far-reaching consequences with emotional as well as practical significance for their parenting capacity and children's development. Responses from family members included the following.

- Low self-esteem—if you are struggling you feel worthless and think others have a low opinion of you and your children.
- Depression—a reaction to stress and feelings of hopelessness.
- Isolating—less access to a social life.
- Being judged by what you have got/how your home looks.
- Living with fear—of social services.
- Fear of getting deeper into poverty/debt.
- No respite from problems—no holidays/no treats for yourself or your children.
- Not meeting 'normal' expectations as defined by wider society and never being 'good enough' in many professionals' eyes.
- Your children not having what other children at school have.
- Your children getting angry with you because you can't buy them what other children have.
- Concern about children being denied life chances and opportunities from an early age.
- Having no identity other than being a parent.
- Having no choice about where you live and what schools your children go to.

Discussions also centred on the discrimination and oppression that family members experienced because of their poverty and status as a service user. Family member participants called this form of discrimination 'povertyism' and links were made to other forms of oppression, such as racism, in relation to both how power relationships are maintained and families' experiences of powerlessness compounded. Some examples of how family members felt 'povertyism' is perpetuated by professionals and agencies included the following.

- A '*poverty-blind*' approach—poverty is seen as the norm and professionals lack knowledge, understanding and appreciation about the impact on children and families.

- *Prejudices and pre-conceived ideas*—family members spoke of feeling judged on the basis of stereotypes, including ‘you are irresponsible and therefore need vouchers not cash’; ‘if you were in care you must be a bad parent’.
- *Poverty as a risk factor*—family members also spoke of being blamed for being in poverty and having difficulties, with a pervasive theme being that it must be their fault as other people cope on state benefits. They also felt that if you fit the poverty stereotype then the ‘risks’ about your family life can lead to being judged about issues that are not child protection matters. An example cited was a badly decorated house.
- *‘Povertyism’ in a system can make people feel they don’t matter, their perspectives and needs are not recognised*—some examples of family members feeling they and their children are of little value included having to wait three weeks when in a crisis, not being listening to about what they feel are the reasons for their difficulties and what would help them.
- *‘Povertyism’ means that workers don’t consider the implications of their actions on people’s self-esteem*—family members spoke of being treated without respect and feeling ‘second class citizens’. A few spoke of having been made to feel grateful for second hand goods, as ‘beggars can’t be choosers’. Other examples included low expectations of themselves and their children, as well as a failure to recognise their strengths and how they have survived adversity.
- *Differential treatment*—participants discussed the experience of poor clients being treated differently from middle class families, who are perceived as more powerful and have their rights respected.

The ultimate aim of the project was to improve social work practice and outcomes for children and families living in poverty. Some family members recalled good social work practice and all participants acknowledged that social workers could make a positive difference in people’s lives. Messages for workers and agencies included the following.

- Demonstrate an understanding that society as well as individuals can create neglect.
- Respect people enough to explain things—be honest and open.
- Have good accountability and complaints procedures (and assist families to use them).
- Don’t label and pre-judge people—get to know the individual.
- Listen to what families think would help them.
- Provide family support at an early stage, before crises occur.
- Treat people with courtesy and respect—don’t be over-intrusive or abuse your power.
- Don’t offer people in poverty a poor service because they are not in a position to challenge you.
- Offer a human touch—don’t be a robot just carrying out procedures and filling in forms.
- Recognise and develop people’s strengths and aspirations—what they have done to survive and what they want for the future.
- Be true to social work values and treat families with dignity and respect.
- Recognise the importance of building a trusting working relationship based on both parties having the child’s best interests at heart.

### **Learning the Lessons**

In this paper we have discussed both the process of working collaboratively with service users and the content of the teaching relating to the impact of poverty on



families' lives and social work interventions. This section considers separately lessons learnt for both social work educators and practitioners. We conclude with reflections on crucial cross-cutting themes that emerge from these two separate but related areas.

### *Involving Service Users in Social Work Education*

Service user involvement is not in itself going to result in differing power relationships and progressive practices. Service users have been critical of the unproductive and 'tokenistic' practices in the name of 'user involvement' (Campbell, 1996). Beresford & Croft (2004, p.62) argue that '... the consumerist involvement offered by managerialist related approaches to social work and social services has generally led to very little, if any, transfer of power and decision making'. They, however, suggest that service user involvement can have a central role in the development of more progressive and liberatory social work practice, and be a positive force for change, particularly if alliances between social workers and service users are developed. Service user involvement in social work training needs to be developed with attention paid to power relationships and within the wider context of anti-oppressive practice (Levin, 2004). Tokenism, selective use of certain groups of service users and the conflation of different viewpoints are all pitfalls that need to be avoided if oppressive power dynamics are not to be re-enacted and indeed amplified within the training process. In relation to child care social work all too often service user involvement is limited to young people's participation, or the more 'deserving' parents of children with disabilities.

The project sought to engage service users in a respectful and meaningful way to develop and deliver a training programme on the realities of family poverty. The ultimate aim was to contribute to the development of social work practice that seeks to counter the deleterious effects of socio-economic deprivation. Any collaborative project that advocates such practice, must of course itself seek to empower service user participants, as well as reflect on and evaluate how processes can be improved. In other words we had to make every effort to 'walk the talk'. During the course of the project we were faced with a number of challenges and learned many lessons for future collaborative work. Many of these issues have resonance with other writing on service user involvement, including Beresford & Croft (2004), Molyneux & Irvine (2004) and Braye & Preston-Shoot (2005).

#### *1. The importance of planning and adequate funding*

A considerable amount of time was devoted to planning and fund-raising prior to the beginning of the project. Adequate funding must be available that includes the remuneration of services users in ways that does not interfere with their benefits and provides money for travel and childcare costs on the day. We were fortunate to have a supporting organisation, ATD Fourth World that has the capacity to do this. Larger public institutions, such as universities, are not always able to offer such flexibility, but will need to address these issues (Levin, 2004; Molyneux & Irvine, 2004). In terms

of meaningfully representing issues of diversity, the budget must also have some capacity for additional costs, such as interpretation costs and travel expenses for participants with special needs. Attention also needs to be paid to engaging service users from a range of backgrounds, some who may be harder to access, e.g. parents with special needs, or asylum-seeking families.

### *2. The provision of adequate support and preparation for service user participants*

Although we planned for morning sessions to help family members prepare for the afternoon group sessions and family members met in-between the main sessions, more support could have usefully been provided. This was particularly the case for family members who required English language or literacy support to read and reflect on written material. The participants also provided emotional support for each other as the discussions often brought up painful memories and some family members were experiencing social work interventions with their children during the life of the project. Levin (2004) highlights the importance of training and support for service user involvement, and the evaluation of this project further confirms the necessity of adequate support, both practical and emotional, in order to promote effective and meaningful participation.

### *3. The importance of working in a group*

One of the over-riding messages from this project is that involving service users in developing and delivering teaching is complex and is a process based on relationships. The regular meetings for family members were essential in developing a sense of ownership of the work, mutual support and group cohesion. In terms of delivering the training it was important for family members to be able to present the views of the group, rather than just their own experiences, which can be emotionally difficult for them and dismissed as unrepresentative by those receiving the training. This model promotes the expertise of family members and presents their contribution as more than experience sharing. However working in groups with various power imbalances can be challenging and knowledge of group processes essential to ensure participants with more overt participatory power, either by virtue of personality or status, do not overshadow less confident participants (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2005).

### *4. The preparation of social work students*

It is all too easy for service user led teaching on social work courses to be one-off events that sit out of kilter with the rest of the programme. This can result in a form of tokenism that has been discussed. The teaching also raised some strong feelings amongst the social workers. Whilst this is not the focus of the current discussion it became clear as the project matured that the teaching was most effective in terms of student learning when the session was fully integrated into the broader anti-oppressive perspectives of the programme. In practical terms this meant preparing the students beforehand in terms of the content and process of the session and then picking up

issues and the feelings raised by the teaching in seminars afterward. As well as optimising the learning of the students this also tended to lead to a more reflective and open atmosphere in which there was less defensiveness toward family members.

### *5. Planning for future work*

The family members continue to deliver training on Royal Holloway courses, as well as other programmes. It has been important to maintain group cohesion, but this has proved more difficult since the project ended. ATD Fourth World has been central to maintaining links with academics and providing continuing support for the service users, however this takes time and money to facilitate. The work is distributed on a democratic basis, with family members taking it in turns to be part of the training teams. A meeting is organised prior to and following each training event to prepare and de-brief and the charges for the training have needed to reflect these additional costs. In order to support service user involvement, higher education institutions and other training providers will need to recognise the differing requirements of service user organisations and be able to respond with flexibility in relation to payment (Levin, 2004). At Royal Holloway we remain committed to including these perspectives as a core component of our qualifying and post qualifying programmes. While policy makers will need to take on board these additional costs when allocating funding, the short to medium term reality is that universities will have to find these resources from existing budgets and we are careful not to exploit the goodwill of our collaborators for whom resources are an even more pressing issue. The challenge for the group is to continue to evaluate and develop the course content and delivery skills of family members, and explore other ways of facilitating the involvement of families living in poverty in social work education.

### *Working Effectively with Families Living in Poverty*

Service user involvement in education should not be an end in itself, but a means to developing effective services. The knowledge generated by projects involving service users needs to be considered within the wider context of other sources of social work knowledge. Campbell (1988, p. 295) refers to the need for 'a disputatious community of truth-seekers' which includes service user knowledge. Some key themes that arose from this project for social work practice are the importance of relationship-based social work; an understanding of power and oppression; and the need for practitioner self-awareness and critical reflection. The contributions from the family members completely endorsed strengths-focussed, relationship-based social work within a framework that recognises and seeks to address discrimination and oppression.

#### *1. Importance of relationship-based social work*

Family members stressed the importance of developing relationships in accordance with the value base of social work. Whilst financial and other practical support clearly does help families in poverty, the psychological impact, including low self-esteem, a

sense of hopelessness and powerlessness must also be recognised. These conclusions support those identified by researchers such as Wilkinson (1999) and Ghate & Hazel (2002). Family members spoke of wanting to build up trusting relationships with workers. A few spoke of their good experiences of social work practice and the important role relationships with workers played in affecting positive change in their lives, a view supported by literature on family support (Gilligan, 2000; Quinton, 2004). However many others spoke of feeling like a statistic, not being valued, and form filling and resources taking precedence in the social workers' minds over their family's needs and views. Family members also recognised that often this was not the fault of the individual worker, but a consequence of organisational pressures and agendas. A number of authors have criticised the increasingly procedurally driven nature of social work practice in Britain as a result of the increasing focus on risk-aversion and performance management (Cooper *et al.*, 2003; Munro, 2004; Parton, 2006). The views of the family members would support Ruch's (2005) assertion that relationship-based practice offers a possibility for social workers to engage with the uniqueness of each individual's circumstances and together explore the roots of their difficulties, however this challenges the prevailing trends to reductionist understandings and technocratic and procedural responses to complex problems.

### *2. Understanding power and oppression*

Family members highlighted the impact on their family's functioning of poverty and other forms of social exclusion on the basis of factors such as race and disability. Relationship-based social work has in the past been criticised for pathologising clients by focussing too narrowly on the individual, and failing to acknowledge wider structural factors. Increasingly however theoretical ideas about relationship-based practice are emerging that incorporate structural as well as individual explanations as contributing to families' difficulties (Turney & Tanner, 2001; Ruch, 2005). The responses of family members would endorse practice within an anti-oppressive framework that includes 'some understanding of the links between people's personal experience of oppression and the structural reality of inequality' (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995, p. 123).

### *3. Self-awareness and critical reflection*

Family members' views on 'povertyism' as well as effective social work intervention highlight the need for social workers and other professionals to be aware of the use of their power and how their actions can either confirm or disconfirm feelings of powerlessness and oppression. These ideas also support a model of relationship-based practice that incorporates an understanding of power and difference in the content as well as process of the work (Turney & Tanner, 2001). Ruch (2005) explores the relationship between recent theorising on relationship-based practice and contemporary understandings of reflective practice and argues that these two approaches are inextricably interconnected. Just as the significance of the social context of families' lives should not be under-estimated, neither should the organisational context in

which practitioners operate. These approaches challenge the dominant ‘technical-bureaucratic’ model of practice and require practitioners to confront the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty that characterises people’s lives and therefore work with children and families (Cooper *et al.*, 2003; Parton, 2005). An acknowledgement of the need to support relationship-based reflective practice must therefore be forthcoming from managers and policy makers. As Ruch (2005, p. 121) explains:

to facilitate the development of relationship-based approaches, which embrace a holistic understanding of clients, of practitioners and of the nature and contexts of social work practice, there is a need for practitioners to be afforded the time and space to respond thoughtfully—reflectively—to the unique, complex and dynamic situations they encounter.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed the work of one project that sought to work collaboratively with service users to develop and deliver training for social workers. The objective of this training was not only to act as a platform for family members to articulate their experiences but to attempt to use their expertise as service users to convey some of the realities of living in poverty and experiencing social work intervention, often of an involuntary nature, because of concerns about the care of their children. We have therefore explored issues arising from out of the evaluation of the *process* of involving service users in social work education and just as importantly the *messages* that family member participants felt important to convey. A number of cross-cutting themes have arisen out of these two related analyses. Undoubtedly the most crucial of these is the message to those who wish to genuinely involve service users in training and develop high quality social work practice that is both ethical and effective, that is the importance of building relationships based on trust, which takes time and effort, and a commitment to addressing power imbalances. Attention to both the practical, as well as emotional needs of service users is also essential. Finally social work educators and practitioners do not work in isolation and organisations must also be prepared to both support the involvement of service users in meaningful ways, as well as seriously reflect on the knowledge generated to ultimately improve the lives of some of society’s most vulnerable children and families.

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