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Specific topic: Quality: Who's Quality? Developing, supporting and sustaining high quality social work services.

Overview

The social work profession intervenes in the lives of some of society's most vulnerable, disadvantaged and excluded individuals, groups and communities. Among the aims of social work involvement is: the protection of service users and the wider community, the promotion of self-determination and improvements in the quality of life of service users.

Social work professionals are charged with a responsibility to provide safe and ethically sound professional services of a high quality.

It is proposed that a critical examination of the phrase 'high quality social work services' needs to be explored through the adoption of a broad based 'whole system' approach. Services which are developed, structured and evaluated in a manner that engages the range of major stakeholders are likely to be the most successful. When stakeholders, in particular service users, participate as partners in these areas they are more likely to engage productively with their allocated social worker. Where service providers engage service users in defining what works best they are able to develop more targeted and responsive services.

Discussion

The concept of quality social work services is embedded in the established ethical and regulatory standards set for the social work profession in England. Clear reference to the notion of 'quality service provision' and the respective responsibilities of both employers and social workers is outlined in the General Social Care Council (GSCC) (2010) 'Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers'.

The British Association of Social Work (BASW) (2002) further identifies quality provision as a central responsibility of social work practitioners.

In order for any consideration of the concept of 'high quality social work services' to be meaningful and productive a critical stance should be employed. The aim of such a critique is to facilitate a moving from the 'taken for granted' usage of the term 'quality' to an applied examination situated within a social work context. When viewed in this context 'quality' should be recognised as a highly subjective, politicised, value laden and fluid concept.

'Quality is never an objective reality, to be finally discovered and pinned down by experts. It is inherently subjective and relative, based on values and beliefs, that may not only vary among and within societies, but will undoubtedly vary over time.' (Moss (1994) p5.)

Acknowledging the constructivist underpinnings of notions of 'high quality services', in social work, highlights a potential incongruence between decision makers, practitioners and service users. Understandings of 'high quality services' are all too often defined and prescribed by policy makers and senior social care management teams. These definitions then translate into a range of well-intentioned policies, procedures and service delivery structures which can conflict with what service users actually need.

Laying the foundations for high quality social work services

For individual social work practitioners to be effective in delivering high quality services they should receive high quality and robust professional qualifying training in institutions of higher education. Laying the foundation of good social work practice is best realised through a partnership between universities, social work employers and service users. In figure 1 the author proposes a partnership model in which universities are able to provide a robust knowledge base. The knowledge gained informs the development of the range of practice skills.

This 'knowledge informed skills set' is further developed, tested and assessed through work based practice placements. Service users provide insights into what works best for them and thus expand the knowledge base of student social workers.

Service Users play an important function in providing qualitative feedback on their experiences of receiving social work services from the student. They further identify strengths and weaknesses alerting the student to opportunities to further develop and enhance their professional practice skills.

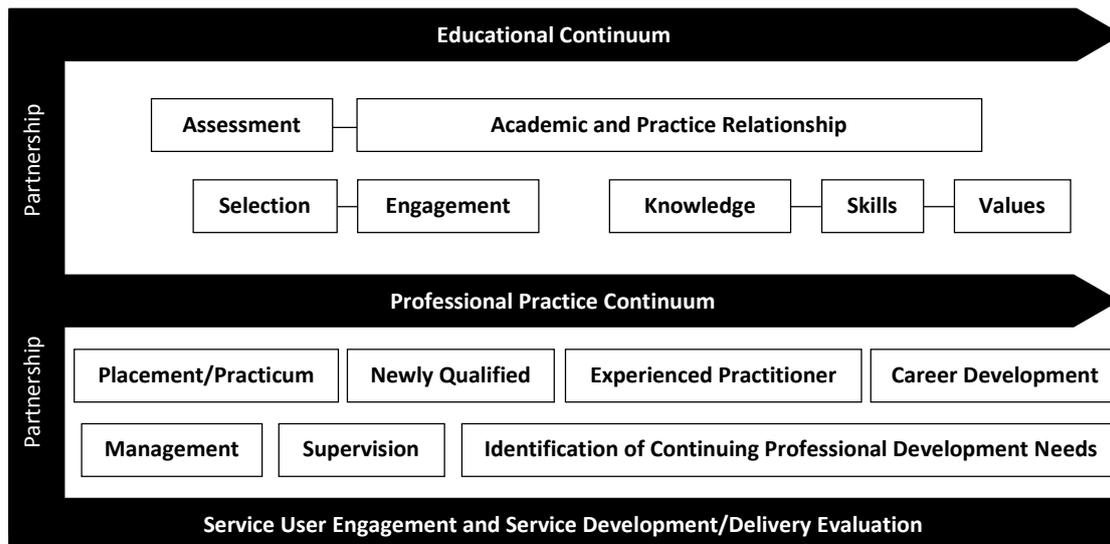


Figure 1

Through this combined approach to professional education, linked with rigorous assessment strategies, a culture of high quality service provision can be nurtured.

This partnership continues beyond the point of initial professional qualification extending to a range of post qualifying and post graduate practice focused educational provision. In a recent publication, the Social Work Reform Board (2010), recognised the need to strengthen the interface between higher education and employers engaging social work practitioners and service users in qualifying and continuing professional development education.

At the point social work graduates enter professional practice they are challenged to incorporate and maintain their commitments to high quality provision into their practice. This commitment can be challenged within the context of significant demands focused on process driven approaches, targets, timescales, costs and volume of work.

Critics of social work services in England suggest that policy makers and senior managers often lose sight of what counts as high quality service for service users, their families and carers. A reductive approach is adopted to quantify 'quality' in terms of timescales, costs, services accessed and how promptly 'problems' were resolved and cases closed.

Munro (2008) draws attention to the often conflicting notions of what constitutes high quality within social work services. The overreliance on target driven performance and time limited interventions, as a means of achieving high quality, conflicts with what social workers and service users themselves identify as important and valuable.

In response to such concerns a system wide framework for engaging key stakeholders is proposed by the author (see figure 2). It is suggested that through the process of examining how individual stakeholder contributions conspire to either support or obstruct high quality provision and outcomes.

The framework (figure 2) suggests that all considerations of social work services should be bounded in the broad socio-political and legal environments which define social problems, shape social policy and determine social work responses. The dictates of legislation and policy translate into local/regional service policies, procedures, structures and responses to 'social problems'. It is at this level that managers, social workers, service users and their supporters work in partnership to shape local services. Direct provision of services is then realised through the work of social work practitioners engaged in direct work with service users.

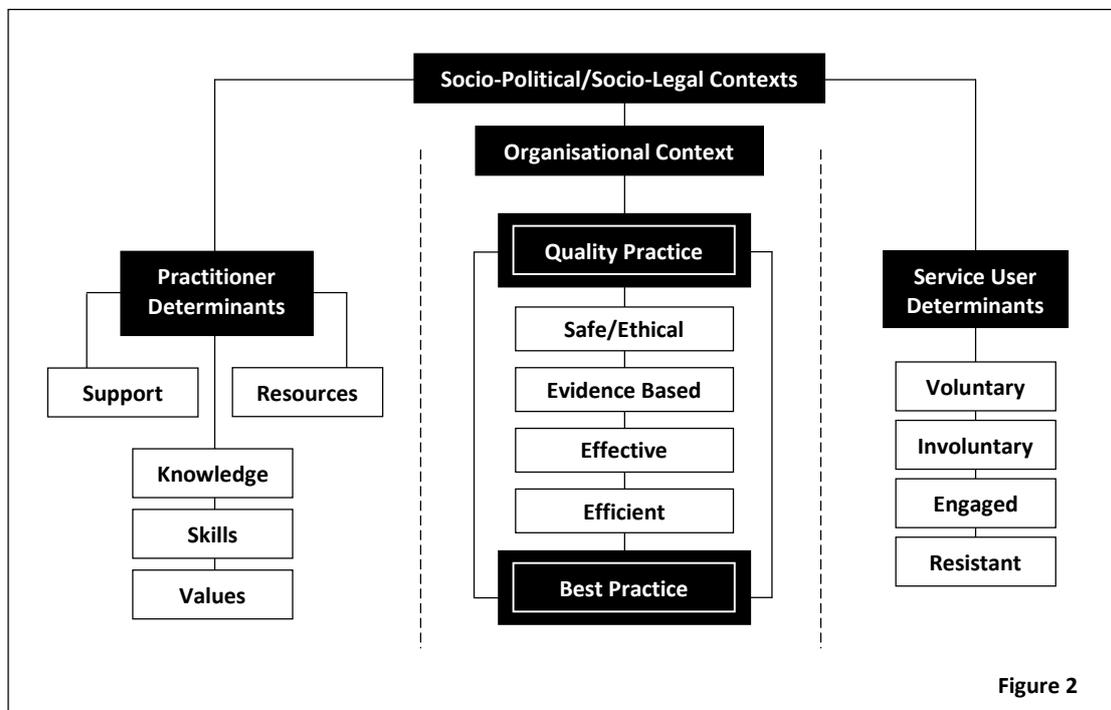


Figure 2

Ultimately successful service outcomes, which enable service users to live safer and more rewarding lives, are born out of the qualities and effectiveness of individual social work practitioners.

As a provider of quality services the social worker must possess a broad ranging and highly developed knowledge base. They must also be able to engage with service users in a skilled manner which balances and mediates the care and control aspects of the professional role. All of this must be underpinned by a personal commitment to the values of social work. The social worker must be supported by their employer with good quality and regular management and supervision.

Access to the range of material resources required to meet the needs of the service user and ongoing training are essential to good and ethical professional practice.

Moving the focus to the service user an important consideration is whether the service user is a voluntary or involuntary recipient of services. It is likely that involuntary service users will, at least initially, be resistant to support and service provision. This will impact on the outcomes secured and service user's formulations of quality service outcomes.

Conclusion

This brief paper invites a critical examination of the ambiguous concept of quality in a social work services context. Adopting such a critical focus serves to promote an appreciation of the complex and dynamic interrelatedness of a range of stakeholder agendas. The potential for shaping high quality services through the partnership between universities, employers, practitioners and service users should be considered in terms of opportunities and challenges.

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