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Co-creating experiences through the use of arts in social work education

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of citizens in social work education was initiated over 30 years ago and continues to travel a 'long and winding road'. Social work education in the UK faces increasing pressure from a range of stakeholders including citizens who use services, regulatory bodies and the media to demonstrate that newly qualified social workers are competent and uphold public trust. While social work education and practice within England and Wales draw on similar traditions in theory and practice, there are important differences in the national and institutional frameworks within which they operate. This article illustrates some of these differences through a focus on social work education provision in one English and one Welsh university. Drawing on the experience and views of the student participants, we examine the benefits of creative approaches that promote citizen involvement and suggest how European traditions can contribute to this process. We define key terms and summarize the literature, followed by presentation of the results and identification of the key learning. We identify that emancipatory models of education can encourage recognition of learners' different strengths and can help to assist social work students' readiness for practice. Finally, we acknowledge the need for cost-benefit outcomes research into if and how citizen coproduction influences subsequent service delivery.

Introduction

A note on terminology: We note the differences in approach between England and Wales regarding elements including regulatory frameworks, standards and cultural identity. Another important distinction concerns the language used to describe interventions with people using social work services. The common phrase in Wales is 'citizens' while in England it is 'People With Lived Experience (PWLE)'. For a discussion of the importance of how we use language to engage with people using services, see McLaughlin (2009). In this article, the phrase 'citizens' is used to include the different national contexts.

While the call for the inclusion of citizen involvement in social work education was first heard in the United Kingdom (UK) over 30 years ago, it is still traveling a 'long and winding road' (Askheim et al., 2016; Molyneux & Irvine, 2004, p. 293). From rather shaky tokenistic beginnings (Forrest et al., 2000; Hatton, 2015) citizen/service-user involvement (McLaughlin, 2009) in social work education is now central to the definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014). In the UK it is required as an integral part of qualifying provision, whether at Bachelor or Masters level (Anka & Taylor, 2016; Department of Health, 2002; Social Care Wales, 2017). Allain et al. (2006) and Hatton (2015) identify that while it is generally perceived to be a positive and well-established factor of social work education (Allain et al., 2006; Hatton, 2015), two areas remain under-represented and under-researched. Firstly, while citizen involvement is generally rated highly by citizens, practitioners, educators (Dorozenko et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2013; Webber & Robinson, 2012) and students (Irvine et al., 2015; Morgan & Jones, 2009) it has been suggested that there is a lack of research on why this might be so (Anka & Taylor, 2016; Duffy et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Videmšek (2017) notes that this includes research with and by citizens with personal experience of using services themselves. Specifically, Webber and Robinson (2013) question whether and how citizen involvement changes how individual social workers practice, and if and how the subsequent services are influenced.

Secondly, Dorozenko et al. (2016) it is acknowledged that the depth of citizen input across institutions is variable and lacks a formal structure (Dorozenko et al., 2016). Some social work education programmes continue to focus on representation within the more traditional elements of selection and assessment of practice learning, rather than as co-productive allies within a reciprocal 'democratic/citizen model' of teaching and assessment (Askheim et al., 2016, p. 129; Hatton, 2017; Skilton, 2011; Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013). Rooney et al. (2016) suggest that barriers to participation and hierarchical exclusion remain, which Anka and Taylor (2016) suggest results resulting in citizens occupying a less-valued peripheral position within academic circles (Anka & Taylor, 2016), with limited power to award summative grades that affect progression decisions (Hughes, 2017; Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013).

The global discourse on citizen involvement in social work education used to be decidedly contextual. Prior to leaving the European Union, England and Wales were the only European countries to require citizen participation. That landscape is changing, with Duffy et al. (2017, p. 126) suggesting that what was 'a peculiarly UK initiative is now an international one'. Askheim et al. (2016), described a positive Swedish initiative, subsequently adopted in Norway, where the citizens and social work students study together to achieve university credit. It has been reported Dorozenko et al. (2016) report that citizen involvement is gathering pace in Australia (Dorozenko et al., 2016), Laging and Heidenreichm (2017) in Germany, Sapouna (2020) in Ireland and Ramon et al. (2019) in Israel, Italy and Serbia/Slovenia (Ramon et al., 2019), while Anka and Taylor (2016) suggest that is is it is suggested to be at an earlier stage of incubation in the United States of America (Anka & Taylor, 2016).

This article reports on research into two UK projects, one in England and one in Wales, that add evidence to this under-researched area and examine the utility of creative approaches to the promotion of citizen involvement. While the development of social

work education and practice within England and Wales has followed similar trajectories, there are important differences between the national and institutional frameworks within which they operate. A brief examination of these similarities and differences is presented to set the context of the two institutions which represent the settings for this research.

A note on terminology: We note the differences in approach between England and Wales regarding elements including regulatory frameworks, standards and cultural identity. Another important distinction concerns the language used to describe interventions with people using social work services. The common phrase in Wales is 'citizens' while in England it is 'People With Lived Experience (PWLE)'. For a discussion of the importance of how we use language to engage with people using services, see McLaughlin (2009). In this article, the phrase 'citizens' is used to include the different national contexts.

Social work education in England and Wales

The Degree in Social Work replaced the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) as the required professional qualification in England from 2003, and in Wales from 2004/5 (Department of Health, 2002; Social Care Wales, 2022). The aims of the Degree were to modernize social services, to improve the status of the profession as well as to increase the numbers of motivated people attracted to it (Department of Health, 2002). The introduction of The Care Standards Act 2000 resulted in new Codes of Practice for social care workers and employers, a Register of people appropriately qualified to work in social care/social work, and restriction of the title 'social worker' (Social Care Wales, 2017c, 2017d).

The increased emphasis on the involvement of people using social work services in the education and training of social workers was codified by Social Work England (SWE) when it became responsible for the regulation of social work in 2019. Social Care Wales is the equivalent regulator and funder in Wales, taking over from the Care Council for Wales in 2017.

Social work has been taught at the University of Portsmouth since the late 1970's. It has sought to develop the 'service user 'voice' during most of that period and particularly between 1995–2001 and regularly since 2004. Since then, this has been expressed primarily through the Social Work Inclusion Group (SWIG) which has presented regularly at JSWEC conferences and other regional and national events. Hatton (2017) notes that its approach has been centered around not just the usual involvement in interviewing, assessment and teaching but in a broader concept which involved the co-production and co-creation of learning activities built on the construction of creative artifacts and modes of expression (Hatton, 2017).

Social Work has been taught at Swansea University (SU) for over 30 years, and the face-to-face structure of the route to qualification is very similar to other institutions within Wales, except for the Open University. Current students can opt for a three-year full-time Bachelor of Science route or a two-year full-time Master of Science route, depending on the individual's prior qualifications. Both routes require over 360 hours of prior social care experience and students must successfully complete block practice learning opportunities. While completing their practice learning opportunities in agencies based on one of five partner local authorities, during which they Students are

supported and assessed by a qualified social worker who has an additional practice assessing qualification at Masters level. All social work programmes in Wales are reviewed annually to ensure that they continue to meet the standards of, and adhere to the rules and requirements of the regulatory body by Social Care Wales (2017). A typical profile of a SU student is a white Welsh female aged between 18–57 years, with English or Welsh as their first language. This is reflective of the social work workforce of Wales which is made up of 85% women, 96.5% white Welsh ethnicity, and 4.1% fluent Welsh speakers (Social Care Wales, 2022).

Co-production

The concept of 'co-production' holds significance in social work education in both England and Wales. The term It is not new, having been used by Ostrom in 1970s Chicago to demonstrate to police as a way of demonstrating to the Chicago police force why crime rates increased when beat officers were removed police officers were taken off the beat (Stephens et al., 2008). Ostrom established that the resultant erosion of relationships and loss of informal knowledge demonstrated that the police needed the community just as much as the community needed the police. In 2004, Cahn applied the analogy of a computer where the different 'programmes' (in this context the specialized services that address crime, health, education and social care) each have their own specific function but cannot exist without a single operating system (a core economy). Goodwin (2018) postulated that positive social relationships resulting from an effective core economy result in the provision of important services to people, but Conversely, it is suggested that overzealous private and public purpose economies erode the relationships and render the system ineffective. Similarly, Sapouna (2020) warns us that an iteration of co-production which serves the system over the citizen becomes co-option, whereby the outcome is compliance instead of transformation.

In contemporary social work legislation and practice, co-production is defined and implemented separately within England and Wales. In England, it was defined in the Department of Health's Personalisation Communications Toolkit:

> co-production is when you as an individual influence the support and services you receive, or when groups of people get together to influence the way that services are designed, commissioned and delivered. (PPF Communications Toolkit in Ramsden, 2010)

In Wales, the principle of co-production is covered by Part Nine of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 (SSW(W)Act 2014). The Practices of co-production are intended to facilitate a local core economy of people working in partnership to help shift the emphasis of support toward that which is created through the common commitment of people with an investment in it. The Co-production Network for Wales (2018) suggests that this may be achieved via, for example, social enterprises, co-operatives, user-led services and third sector organizations (Co-production Network for Wales, 2018).

With changes in political and socio-economic conditions resulting in UK social workers being challenged to practice within increasing financial constraints and decreasing service availability, alternatives to traditional practices must be sought (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2012). Moxley et al. (2012) suggest that one such source is the arts, which

can offer unconventional ways for social workers and citizens to work in collaboration to creatively achieve insight into social issues (Moxley et al., 2012). Skoura-Kirk et al (2013, 2020) and Wehbi (2015) suggest that non-traditional social work education is key for the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of thought and practice that is more fitted to contemporary and future practice requirements. Similar to feminist and disability theoretical stances, Irvine et al. (2015) note that a creative approach to education, similar to feminist and disability theoretical stances, requires the reorganization of traditional social worker/citizen relationships to achieve new ways of apportioning power. The building blocks for this approach must be laid at the beginning because, as identified by Simons and Hicks (2006), creativity requires students to explore diverse ways of thinking and knowing, and ingrained patterns can be challenging to influence (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2012).

These ideas do not represent new thinking, particularly in European social pedagogy. Hatton (2013) has illustrated how the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard's concept of *Menneskesyn* questioned the balance of power. Another Danish writer, Husen (1996), applied the *Common Third* to social work, within which the central focus of both the citizen and the social worker is on something that is outside of the reason for them meeting, a project that both parties can connect with and share in equal terms. Hatton (2017) and Moxley et al. (2012) identify empowerment as occurring as a product of the promotion of intentional co-productive opportunities (Hatton, 2017; Moxley et al., 2012) that 'are not specifically about the art itself' (Wehbi, 2015, p. 47). Walton (2012) has identified the existence of a slight but constant body of support for the presence of the creative arts in social work over recent decades, but notes that it has been overshadowed by the managerialistic, bureaucratic and professionalized demands of education. River et al. (2017) conclude that it is the collaborative element that encourages insight into, and critical understanding of, the process of building relationships.

Hatton (2020) suggests that the development of such an approach needs a clear conceptual framework which is based on a critical understanding of the act of creativity. The incorporation of an approach predicated on a commitment to intersectionality, social activism and socially engaged art provides an opportunity to develop new social practices for integration into the curriculum. *Intersectionality* emphasizes that inequality does not fall equally on everyone but demonstrates that this is more than just exploitation by social class. Like social construction, it 'highlights the significance of social institutions in shaping and solving social problems' (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 16). *Social activism* refers to a process whereby we engage in discourses which transform but also provide a liberatory pedagogy which not only engages with current practice but also seeks to develop new prefigurative forms of practice (Freire, 1972). *Socially engaged art*, which Helguera (2011, p. 78) identifies as having a particular place in the way we frame our involvement around creativity, aims to 'democratize viewers, making them partners, participants or collaborators in the construction of the work' (Helguera, 2011, p. 78). Hatton (2020) believes that a focus on democratic participation fits clearly within a social pedagogic paradigm (see Hatton, 2020).

El-Lahib et al. (2020) echo these finding in their research into students' narratives of using arts-informed approaches in social work education, with the students reporting enhanced feelings of connection both to others and themselves. Similarly, Papouli (2017) found that the arts can provide a secure base from which students can explore and give

meaning to real-life situations, while Wehbi et al. (2018) concluded that the arts offer innovative, holistic and comprehensive ways of teaching social justice. Cramer et al. (2018) and El-Lahib et al. (2020) noted that students perceived that using art enriched their learning by deepening their emotional and cognitive connections to themselves and others. However, Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2012) identify the need for more research into impact, while McCrystal and Wilson (2009) caution us that barriers exist, comprising the attitudes, practices and confidence levels of both students and educators. Additional barriers may include student resistance due to feelings of self-judgment and ambiguity of assessment (Wehbi et al., 2018).

Case examples: CREATE and co-create

This section reports on two similar arts-based approaches for the inclusion of citizen co-production within social work education, one of which is based in England (CREATE) and one in Wales (Co-Create).

CREATE is run at UP by the Social Work Inclusion Group (SWIG). Funded by the Department of Health, members work co-productively with groups of social work and creative arts students to produce a creative artifact such as a photographic exhibition, a piece of drama or film, a poem, dance etc. The climax of the project is the presentation of the work to peers within a community space. Co-Create is a similar project inspired by CREATE, funded by Social Care Wales and run at SU by the social work citizen involvement group Llais ('Voice' in English). Llais members are partnered with social work students and a creative advisor (a community artist or citizen) and work together co-productively to identify an issue and present this to peers in English or Welsh through a creative medium such as a story, poem, dramatization, art-work, dance etc.

In both projects, the presented issues may relate to social justice, equality, diversity, experiences of using services or of being a carer. The only requirement is that the issue is identified by the citizen/PWLE as something that matters to them. There is little input from social work educators other than the organization and initiation of the task, the underlying ethos of which is to facilitate and promote student social worker engagement and understanding of citizens' identities, circumstances and experiences. Upon completion, the students produce a critical reflection that aims to harness student reflection on group work, on their strengths and challenges in working co-productively as part of the group, and on recognition of issues facing service users and carers.

Both approaches were evaluated by the authors at PU and SU, to gain the perspectives of participants on the benefits of the project to personal and professional development, to understand the challenges of coproduction, and creativity and to enhance this creative educational pedagogical approach.

Methods

Research was carried out with citizens, staff and students who took part in the projects and sought to evaluate the effectiveness of this creative form of social work education (Hatton, 2017; Kara, 2015). Only a representative sample of the results are reported on here, focusing on the students' evaluations of the projects. Further publications will report on the evaluations of citizens/carers, and on the creative

artifacts that were produced. The research themes adopted in PU framed the overall research and involved semi-structured interviews in PU (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) and subsequently a survey, focus group and a content analysis of student assignments at SU in 2017/2018 (Silverman, 2014). The use of different methods was pragmatic in that the decision was based on the objectives of the research and the engagement preferences of the students. Herein we only report on the qualitative data obtained from the focus groups and interviews. Ethical approval was obtained from each University's respective ethics committee, and the research was carried out as a collaboration between social work educators and citizen researchers. The pragmatic sampling strategy was that of complete collection, and all participating students were invited to participate, resulting in between 10–15% of UP students and 25% of SU students. The UP semi-structured interviews were recorded and analyzed (for more information, see Hatton, 2020). The SU focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All participants were assured of anonymity, and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity.

Before reporting the findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations As this was a small-scale project, no claims are made regarding its generalizability beyond the geographical and time boundaries of the two institutions that participated. In addition, The researchers were also social work educators involved in facilitating the projects and whilst we took steps to minimize researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2013) such as providing written assurance that no detriment would result from either participation or nonparticipation, it is a possibility that bias may have occurred. A benefit was that our positions as insiders gave us proximity to the participants, meaning we were familiar with the research environment and with the participants. However, the cons include our insider status encouraging us to be subjective and biased, and our positions of power may have made students feel compelled to participate. Although we took steps to reduce research bias and any sense of obligation such as providing written assurance that no detriment would result from either participation or nonparticipation, there cannot be complete neutrality, and the best that can be hoped for is for the researcher to be aware of their own personal bias. Furthermore, the research was not co-produced with students and in future research we will seek to use more co-productive and creative methods in line with our overall aim of making this a central plank of our curriculum change activities (Kara, 2015).

Results

The following five key themes (see Figure 1) were drawn from interviews and focus groups with students about their experiences of engaging creatively with citizens. The participants' own words are used to illustrate the themes, with some explanatory narrative provided.

Figure 1. The five key themes of the PU/SU creativity research.

Theme one—listening and working together

One of the participating students from the PU cohort, A PU student identified that a sense of working collectively is a key part of these types of interventions. She said:

> The Project brought into me more focus is that . . . a collectivist voice is also really important and the power of a collective voice is absolutely needed. [Aaliyah, PU]

Another PU student explored what she felt was her commitment to a humanistic, individualist perspective with a focus on social activism (Hatton, 2020), which she partly attributes to her counseling background:

> Although we talk about person-centred practice, in reality it does not always happen as you say. Service users are heard but for some reason their voice gets lost further down the process . . . this creative work has (taught me) . . . as social workers, we need to be challenging managers and higher authorities and say well Ok but the service users says this . . . (act on it). [Jane, PU]

SU students' perceptions about working together varied resulting from differences in the way the groups were organized. Some students had, and appreciated having, a choice about which group they wanted to join and the type of art they wanted to produce:

> We weren't put into groups. The majority gave the citizen the choice of what to do. We let then come up with the idea. [Elen, SU]

Other participants reported having had no choice, and disliked simply being placed in group where the artistic element was already decided upon based on the talents of the creative advisor:

> I didn't enjoy it ... because I didn't know what group I was in, I had no choice. [Sian, SU]

> We were just put into groups and told to go into a room and that was it. I hated it. [Alun, SU]

The consensus was that students felt strongly that they should have choice about which group to join, and within that group to then decide upon the artistic element co-productively with the citizen.

Some students commented on how much time was required to bond with the citizen before the creative advisors joined in and articulated that they would have liked more direction to ensure everyone, particularly the creative advisors, understood the concept of co-production. Bron captured these suggestions neatly in her comment:

> More planning and prep, and more time with citizens. Choice is vital. The key is to push people a little out of their comfort zones, but just a little, not so far they can't bear it. There also needs to be an 'escape route', to play to people's strengths – if someone just wants to be in the background and hold the boom, then they can just hold the boom if that is what they want. [Bron, SU]

Bron's suggestions were echoed by others:

> I really enjoyed it, really enjoyed the day – what confused me was trying to get to know the citizen while we knew we had to convey a story through dance so we had a dance routine to learn as well. So, trying to get to know her story and build her story – we didn't have time to sit and chat and get to know the story, what part she wanted to ... It was just like 'ok we have to do that ...'. We would have benefitted from having a bit more planning time to make the story and then do the dance. It was great though, I really really enjoyed it. [Alys, SU]

Theme two—empathy

When asked about her experience of working with service users, a PU student argued that her main learning from the creative work she undertook was that:

> Service users are just people like everyone else, and getting to know the character of our service user is and working with them, it just makes you realise that we are all (in it together) ... there should not be any difference between a social worker, a service user ... we should be working together than like a hierarchical thing where the social worker tells someone what to do, it's about what the service user wants, and finding the best way to work with that ... I think that's the main thing. [Tanya, PU]

Another Portsmouth student reinforced this point when he talked about the importance of partnership in the relationship between service users and students, and the need to think about how academic learning can be applied in practice:

> It gives them (the students) a really good sense of reality ... so that when you graduate ... you are fully aware of what a service user, what are service users thinking ... get that sense of reality you're not just learning the academic side, you're also learning about the physical side, your learning about people and where they are coming from, what their needs are and how you can adapt your academic learning ... and putting ... what you learned into practice. [Bill, PU]

This PU student described how the project helped them to experience a learning transformation, whereby they felt that they crossed a threshold in their understanding:

> It's about seeing service users differently. Seeing people with a disability not just as people with a disability but just as people . . . it's more than just tokenistic. It's actually, from the get go, working together, coming up with ideas together. Producing what you produce together. Really using the service users' knowledge, their skills, to come up with something at the end. [Mandeep, PU]

As identified by Meyer and Land (2005), crossing this learning threshold is perceived to be irreversible and it illuminates other knowledge which can then be synthesized and brings further understanding of the subject (Meyer & Land, 2005). Students who either do not cross this threshold or remain wedged there are at risk of merely performing a ritual through donning a mask of adherence to the social model (Goffman, 1959), rather than adherence being the articulation of a deeply-held commitment to this theoretical facet of the profession. Specifically in relation to social work education and the link with disability studies, Morgan (2012) identified the threshold as the point at which the social model is understood and used sincerely, instead of using it in a way that is deceitful to enable educational and professional expectations.

Theme three—strengths and challenges

The general consensus was that the experience of working with the citizens themselves was a positive one:

> The service users were great to work with. [Elin, SU]

A Portsmouth student supported this point when suggesting that working with one of SWIG's co-chairs was a challenge that he needed to rise to:

> When you meet someone like Kev (the co-chair) . . . who challenges you, and really draws it out of you well and it really makes you think, well you know what you're right. I'm wrong. [Thabo, PU]

The expertise contributed by the creative advisors was also appreciated for doing justice to the citizens' experiences:

> I think the creative artist was fantastic. He had all the equipment. We did the documentary. He was a lovely guy. The finished product was amazing - it was fantastic. [Bron, SU]

One challenge the students identified was negotiating the complexities of the interactions they had with citizens, and keeping on-track with the co-productive essence of the project:

> I learnt just how important it is to keep the service user at the centre of everything we do . . . unless we support a . . . a service user perspective . . . there is no point in doing this job really. [Peter, PU]

However, all participants mentioned the existence of conflict. These students described having to manage it themselves directly and appropriately:

> So yeah it got a bit awkward at times. [Alun, SU]

everyone has different expectations ... different ways of working with another person. And I think that sometimes it's a struggle to try and temper that without offending people, to always bring it back to the service user. [Peter, PU]

The excerpt from Bron, below, illustrates how she reflected on the feeling of awkwardness that resulted from her experience, and how she was subsequently able to reframe it into a confidence-building positive:

> The (citizen) I was with I couldn't understand a word (they) was saying because of the cameras pointing at me and the way (they) used (their) language. I was like "I really don't get it".

> I looked back and remembered that I was in nursing for 10 years and that is not how we speak, it is not how professionals speak, and then I thought the thing I had out of it was a sense of vulnerability. From a citizen perspective, it is about communication and also that you are being scrutinised and being made to talk about things you don't want to talk about. That is what I got from it. [Bron. SU]

Other students reflected on their learning from witnessing conflict within other groups' experiences:

> I remember the (citizen) and (they were) quite abrupt at times as well weren't (they)? I wasn't in that group but I remember watching you guys [referring to other students in the focus group] and I could see how awkward it was. . . .. [Elin, SU]

Elin was also able to reflect on the positives of her experience of conflict within her group, and apply it to a hypothetical practice situation. She identified that her learning concerned the importance of acknowledging awkward situations:

> Yeah, but working together with people you find difficult, like challenges in social work you're getting experience of ... do you sit there and not do anything and leave it get to a stage where no one can do anything or do you address it? [Elin, SU]

Within other groups, students reported the behavior of the citizen as the source of the conflict:

> ... (the citizen) got kind of challenging towards us. You could see, you know, (the citizen) was pushing and probably trying to get the best out of us I suppose . . . . I think (the citizen) got excited and (they) just got lost in it. [Bron, SU]

In terms of the strengths of our approaches, students saw this as more than just being partners it was also about critical engagement,

> The challenging part was the questions from the service users because they could really analyse what we were saying. It's OK to talk about it and advocate for people but unless we had that experience we would never know completely how it feels ... the questions from them were much more real and challenging. [Anna, PU]

Theme Four—Co-production/Co-creation

Students reflected on the importance of engagement and dialogue in the production of the creative artifacts noting:

> The challenging part was the questions from the service users because they could really analyse what we were saying. It's Ok us talking and advocating for people but unless we had that experience we would never know how completely if feels, so it was harder the questions from them were much more real and challenging. [Charlie, PU]

Another student noted that the creative work was about:

> Listening to the service users, getting to … (hear) … their voices, making sure their voices are heard and the choices they make … are taken into consideration rather than only looking at what needs to be done and then getting on with it. I think taking time to understand a service user and their needs and how they want their service given to them is of paramount importance in my view. [Amy, PU]

Sian described how, after her final Co-create performance, she experienced a personal 'lightbulb' moment when she finally understood the real meaning of the project:

> It is not about the end product, not about the performance, it is about how we work together to come up with something together. [Sian, SU]

Students articulated that they were able to identify a range of outcomes from different perspectives. Alys, below, reflected on two factors; firstly, the sense of achievement that the performance gave her, and secondly, the way in which her relationships with her peers changed because of the project:

> On the day, people were nervous, it did bring the group together in a different way and it did mean we did things with different people that we wouldn't normally have done. It was a good experience. [Alys, SU]

This relationship element was also identified by others:

> It encouraged us to socialise more as a cohort, open up and speak to each other. Mingling. [Sian, SU]

> It helped us see people in a different way. Nice, less formal. [Elin, SU]

Colette, suggested that the citizens she worked with embraced the leadership role:

> I think they guide us, it was service user led. [Colette, PU]

Alun appreciated the opportunity because:

> It encouraged us to see citizens who use services as having different facets as well, not just one thing. [Alun, SU]

Theme five—involvement—real or tokenistic?

A key element in our relationships with citizens was the question of whether their involvement was real or tokenistic (Arnstein, 1969). When discussing their collaborative work on the debate days, one of the PU students commented:

> I needed to have that experience before going into practice. Because now, it wouldn't phase me, but if someone had said to me, right I am putting you straight into practice with people with disabilities I would have become quite anxious, but now I know I have nothing to be anxious about. [Kirsty, PU]

James reflected similarly:

> Creativity forces people to think outside the box . . . how to communicate with people . . . I also like the fact that . . . the students have an edge when they go out into the workforce. [James, PU]

Another student noted that the process was more about involvement than tokenism noting that:

> It's actually, from the get go, working together, coming up with the ideas together. Producing what you produce together. And really using the service user's knowledge, their strength, their skills to, yeah, come up with something at the end really. [Claire, PU]

This is reinforced by Joanne, another student who suggested that:

> It is not just about listening is it, . . . you also need to act on it as well. [Joanne, PU]

One SU student felt the creative advisor in her group did not appreciate or subscribe to the principles or actions of co-production.

> One (creative advisor) was really hard work. (They) made things very difficult. With (their) input and changing things. So it was like . . . everything that we had done in the day she came in the afternoon and it was like 'no you need to do it this way and this way and this way' . . . she told us what to do, it wasn't from the service users' perspective. It wasn't co-productive. I tried to say this but it wasn't heard . . . I went out and called someone in because she was arguing with the others . . . there was uproar in the group. [Sian, SU]

This is reflected in the response of another PU student who reflected:

> I think working with the service users has really helped breakdown any assumptions, I've worked with children with disabilities, I've worked with adults as well and its learning that communication isn't easy for everybody and you have to give time to let them . . . (service users) they have got thoughts/voice but it's about giving time . . .. [Karla, PU]

She also recognized that over-anxiety in our interactions with service users can, perversely, deny them voice. She added that:

> I think one thing I have to learn is that I don't need to say things quickly. It has to be thought about before I say it, although I am still not doing it right now. [Karla, PU]

An SU student, Sian, identified that the very insightful lesson she took from the project was the importance of listening to the views of the citizen and trying to encourage them in situations where they may be feeling particularly disempowered:

> You have to listen to the citizen about what they want, cos we tell them what services they are having. So sometimes you gotta do things you don't like too. [Sian]

These insights from students who have studied on the PU and SU social work programmes provide concrete illustrations of the debates framed in the earlier discussion and suggest a way we can achieve change in student outlook and practice if we meaningfully engage service users/carers in our programmes. They also provide concrete examples of how we can implement the theoretical ideas about creativity, inclusion and social pedagogy mentioned above.

Discussion

The motivations to provide a more creative pedagogy/approach to social work education and one with which citizens were centrally included, provided logistical and attitudinal/cultural challenges. Nonetheless, our research suggests students engaged co-productively with citizens, and gained a more holistic appreciation of their own and citizens' intersectional identities, their circumstances, and their strengths. The benefits were not one way, with citizens also expressing that they felt included in the curriculum and that their strengths and voices were valued.

Payne (2021) has acknowledged that, increasingly, neoliberal social care structures and professional regulation impact on social workers' consciousness of, or desire to, engage in social activism (Payne, 2021). Bent-Goodley (2015) notes that creative curriculums can nurture social activism by providing space and voice for marginalized citizens to share their lived experience (Bent-Goodley, 2015) through art, poetry, drama, documentary, dance and so on. In doing so, they can facilitate an awakening amongst students of social injustice and critical theory. Whilst the 'End Product' was not seen by students as the main goal, these forms can offer a vehicle for wider dissemination and awareness raising, for example through social media and performances in community spaces.

These small-scale research projects illustrate two approaches to the use of creativity in encouraging meaningful citizen involvement in social work education, and emphasize the importance of intersectionality, social activism and socially engaged art. We have produced findings that both strengthen and add to the existing evidence-base, with implications for citizen co-production in social work education. Firstly, our research confirms the general appreciation of the value of citizen co-production as a method of challenging the dominant professional hierarchy (Allain et al., 2006; Hatton, 2015, 2020; Rooney et al., 2016). We emphasize the importance of relationship-building in the development of interactions between citizens, students and academics that are based on more equal foundations.

Furthermore, the cross-national comparison acknowledged that the inclusion of citizen participation as an element of social work education is nuanced, affected by barriers and can be 'tricky'. As identified by Walton (2012), the importance of ensuring inclusion, participation, agency and emotional perception is revealed (Walton, 2012). In addition, our research has highlighted that systematic individual and effective citizen involvement is essential to subvert the traditional paternalistic practices of social work education. This is in accordance with the findings of Askheim et al. (2017) who have called for the creation of strong alliances between citizens, students and institutions in order to identify and address the elements that are currently missing from the curriculum). Quality research that helps us understand the impact of creativity is essential, a point echoed by Beresford (2013) who warns that the cuts in funding because of austerity threaten the continuation of this element of professional education. As a profession, we need to continue to advance our understanding of this element of professional education to ensure that we are not significantly adversely affected by austerity cuts (Beresford, 2013).

Generalisation of our findings to other programmes was neither an expectation nor an aim of our research, and the limitations of this small-scale research project are

acknowledged and as suggested by Sapouna (2020) we remain alert to the paternalistic problems that may be associated with co-option including cloning, where the participants closely resemble the researchers (Sapouna, 2020). This must be balanced with social work education that addresses 'othering' in an ever-increasingly globalized world (Duffy et al., 2017) where citizen knowledge may not be perceived to be as valuable as academic knowledge. Rooney et al. (2016) suggest that barriers to participation and hierarchical exclusion remain, resulting in those with lived experience occupying a less-valued peripheral position within academic circles (Anka & Taylor, 2016), with limited power to award summative grades that affect students' progression decisions (Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013). Hughes (2017) calls for sustainable structural change, while River et al. (2017) suggest that an emancipatory model of education can encourage a dynamic environment that recognizes different strengths that Joubert (2020) believes may ultimately result in students' increased readiness for professional practice (Joubert, 2020).

Future priorities

Our research has identified two key future research priorities. Firstly, there is a need for cost-benefit outcomes research led by citizens and students into if and how citizen co-production influences the subsequent services received by citizens (Webber & Robinson, 2013). Secondly, we require 'what works' research into the factors that ameliorate citizens' barriers to participation (Askheim et al. 2017).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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