Students and Refugees Together (START): Inter-Professional Learning and Service Innovation

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Students and Refugees Together (START): Inter-professional Learning and Service Innovation
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Abstract:
This paper presents four perspectives of an innovative organisation which was set up in 2001 to respond to the unmet needs of refugees and asylum seekers in the far south west of England. Social Work students were supported to undertake one of their assessed practice placements working with families referred by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) teacher and the local Social Services referral co-ordinator. The organisation has grown from a small 'virtual' organisation, staffed only by students, to a registered charity employing health and social care staff who supervise students from increasingly diverse professions to learn through service provision. The perspectives of a service user, a student and the manager are presented to illustrate the philosophy, principles and practice of the agency. Consideration is given to the relationship of academic institutions to health and social care provision and practice. The intention here is to promote debate about the potential of academic institutions to stimulate change through action as well as teaching and research.

Introduction
This paper begins with a description of the demographic and social context for the organisation with a brief account of its development, philosophy and principles from the Chair and instigator of START (a social work academic). This is followed by contributions about of the organisation from the perspectives of a service user¹, a student and the manager (an ex-student). These accounts offer an illustration of ideas in action that are then reflected on in a comment about the capacity of an academic institution to stimulate change.

¹ The service user account took the form of an interview conducted by Mel Parker, Research Fellow of the University of Plymouth 'Centre for Excellence in Professional Placement Learning' at Correia's request.
Demographic and Social Context

The consequences of migration, particularly forced migration, offer some serious challenges to the UK’s claim of being a civilised society. People with a ‘well founded fear of persecution’ (Geneva Convention, 1951) are treated with suspicion and hostility, incarcerated in detention centres, left to find their own way through highly complex social support structures without the benefit of interpreters and in some cases, denied the right to support themselves or have access to food and shelter. A city in the South West of England raises some particular challenges for social cohesion. A historically predominantly White area where the Black and Minority ethnic (BME) population was 0.6% (2001 census) fostered a ‘colour blind’ and hostile attitude within the local population, some of whom would openly say they had moved to the west country to ‘get away from Black people’. Research shows that ‘social tension is usually highest in areas with relatively small numbers of people seeking asylum and with little experience of integrating other groups’ (Boswell, 2003) and in Plymouth this situation has been extreme. Families as well as individuals from many different countries have been dispersed to Plymouth, resulting in rapid demographic change. Since 2000 the number of first languages spoken in the city schools has risen from 26 to over 60 and some primary schools in the city which, five years ago had no BME pupils now have classes in which 25% of the children are Black or from minority ethnic groups.

START began as a response to urgent need identified by the teacher from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (part of the Local Authority Education) and the local Social Services Staff in these agencies met families whose difficulties did not fall into the prescribed criteria of any existing provision but were serious and, in some cases, life threatening. The University of Plymouth Social Work Practice Learning Co-ordinator collaborated with these agencies to create a service staffed by students on placement who were able to respond to these needs. With office space ‘donated’ by the City Council the organisation provided a service to 40 families through 14 student placements in the first two years (Butler, 2006). Now a registered charity, the organisation offers casework, community development, support in finding and maintaining housing and employment and a range of activities that support refugees to achieve their potential, contribute to the community and access the services to which they are entitled. An allotment project, sewing group and weekly ‘Cultural Kitchen’ provide support for vulnerable people and opportunities for otherwise
isolated women, children and men to socialise and build social networks. Partnerships and funding sources from ‘Project GB’ European Social Fund, Higher Education, ‘Supporting People’ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, The Big Lottery, Primary Care Trust and the City Council recognise the urgent need to understand the unique demographic shifts in the city and confirm that START continues to support integration for this highly diverse population.

Students and Refugees Together (START) works with vulnerable BME groups, particularly refugees, in a holistic way to respond to their needs and help them to realise their potential. The organisation works with refugees and seeks to recognise and release their capacity through using a strengths approach (Nash, 2005) in responding to their particular needs and resources. Students are a vital part of the organisation’s workforce and bring energy, a freshness of approach and a culture of learning together. This challenges the notion that educational agendas and service agendas are necessarily in conflict and recognises the capacity of both refugees and students as potentially high social contributors rather than a burden (Butler, 2005).

Since the organisation began in 2001, START has worked in partnership with other agencies in the city and has established strong credentials in responding to local circumstances in an effective and flexible way. The principles that underpin the way it operates are:

• that service users are full participants
• that assessment is holistic not criteria-based.
• that the approach is multi-disciplinary
• that support planning is service user focused
• and that all work is concerned with promoting strengths and independence

A Service User’s Perspective
[I have been in the UK] about three years. I came straight to Plymouth from Angola. I arrived in London and the Home Office sent me straight to Plymouth. I came with my family – a boy and a girl.

When I arrived in Plymouth I was firstly told about the Cultural Kitchen by someone who was working with me from the Home Office and from there I found out about START.
When I first went to the Cultural Kitchen I was really happy because I met other people who had been like me waiting for a decision - if I could stay in the UK. The decision took 8 months. It was a terrible time and when I went to the Cultural Kitchen I was happy because I can speak to other people who were like me and knew what it was like waiting for the decision. It was so good for socialising at a time when I was really unhappy and depressed. My children also came to the Kitchen (my son is 17 now and my little girl 3) and played with the other children there. We met many, many people that went to the Kitchen. I still use the Cultural Kitchen, I go when I am not busy now, but I went mostly while I waited for my decision. It was wonderful because there were not many places I could go.

START helped me with social security and sorting out benefits. START also helped me with filling in the forms for the Home Office decision. I had many student social workers from START.

I found that every student worked differently some worked more imaginatively and quickly than others. I talked to Rowena about one student who was a bit slow, because I was having to wait too long for things and then she became better.

When I needed to leave my first place I said I have to leave here quickly and where can I go? START helped me sort it out. When I came here I knew nothing and couldn't speak English. START sent me to the supporting people, social security offices and doctors and helped me sort out my home. When I needed to move to my new home they helped me contact electricity, gas because I did not know anything START helped me to sort all of this.

I think the organisation is very, very helpful. When you come for the first time to this city you don't know what you need to do and START helps with this. I saw START in the very early days at the Cultural Kitchen. It has grown because more people know about the organisation. Every year it gets better because it helps more people – they have done very, very well.

It would be great if START in the future could run a free-phone line for everyone who is new to the area. They know so much that they could provide all the information you need to know when you are new here.
A Student's Perspective (2005)

As a social work student, the START project has made me think about the concept of 'social working' in a different light. I have particularly seen how practising in an effective and culturally sensitive way can radically improve the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. One of the dangers which statutory social work can create is that social workers may forget the true meaning of their work by becoming buried in the bureaucracy which surrounds their role. Thompson (2000) defines the ability to learn how to handle this as a skill of social work and one that facilitates 'basic survival' (p168). He says that the true meaning of social work lies with the individuals with whom we work, with an emphasis on meeting individual need. From my own observations, the START project counteracts the fear of individuals becoming lost within the system by the commitment to social inclusion. The Cultural Kitchen is a prime example of this as is the casework service which enables individuals to use services that otherwise are inaccessible (Butler, 2005).

A unique aspect of the START project is its ability to offer placements to students from a variety of disciplines. The work undertaken is creative in its approach and bridges a gap in order to support refugees and asylum seekers within Plymouth. Since the beginning of the project in 2001, roughly thirty students have contributed and benefited from the valuable eye-opening experience which this project gives. Many students, like myself, are student social workers and have only experienced statutory social work placements. Therefore through day-to-day casework, we learn ability, skills and knowledge of refugee and asylum seekers’ struggle to deal with widespread discrimination and knowledge of the real difficulties faced by one of the most discriminated against groups of the population. Students are a large part of the workforce at START and it is evident that the organisation is concerned with student learning. I worked alongside students from disciplines such as nursing, occupational therapy, psychology and drama who also had the opportunity to experience and contribute to community projects, media and database tools, and the development of groups. These activities highlight how creative START is in responding to the needs of the community, and flexible in meeting students’ needs. Students are well supported throughout and placements provide an insight into the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers are prevented from exercising their rights, and how discrimination and oppression affect their lives within society (Humphries, 2004).
Hayes (2005) details this discrimination going as far back as the Aliens Act 1905, of which the name represents discrimination itself. It is sad to see that many people's opinions of refugees and asylum seekers still come from this 'aliens' perspective. I believe that incorrect media stereotyping and stigmatisation lead many people to remain ignorant of a refugee or asylum seeker's situation and accept what is portrayed to be the truth. I realised how infrequently articles are published in tabloid newspapers about how badly refugees and asylum seekers are treated or about the ongoing problem of discrimination being ingrained within structure and society. When working at START I experienced this picture and began to understand what individuals have to sacrifice to gain freedom and to live without fear – something many of us take for granted. I imagined for example, having to give up my home, job, culture and country and never seeing friends and relatives again. Very often this is just the beginning. One example when I worked at START consisted of an agency refusing to speak to E, a woman with refugee status with whom I was working, and asking to speak to me alone. The worker then proceeded to question E's refugee status and entitlement to service even though all the evidence was at hand. This caused E to become very frightened and so together, E and I promptly lodged a complaint. Newland (2001:15) appeals for equality in respect of culture and recognises that 'although Britain is very much a multicultural society in terms of diversity, tolerance of varied cultures has never been anywhere near total, even in the most ethnically strong areas.' This statement reflects many refugee and asylum seekers' situations and something which workers at START constantly have to challenge in practice. Challenging inequality has been an essential part of my work at START, ensuring that individuals' rights and entitlements are maintained. This proves essential to increase positive future outcomes. Working with differentiating beliefs and cultures to my own and basing my practice upon anti-racist and anti-discriminatory theories has been an integral part of the work carried out (Coulshed and Orme, 1998).

START has enabled my development as a sensitive practitioner to be increased, recognising and building upon my individual strengths. An example of this is the use of interpreters in practice. This enables service users to communicate in their own language, and respects strengths and uniqueness. Cornwell (2001) describes the use of interpreters as facilitating equal opportunities and service user access, also to promote universal understanding. My role at START has also been based on
advocacy, for example successfully assisting the X family [who speak little English] to refuse an inappropriate property due to social isolation issues. Working at START has improved my practice in many other areas. I have had the opportunity to work with people of numerous cultures, ethnic and religious backgrounds, which has been personally rewarding due to growing up in a very White orientated part of England, and meeting a professional learning need. I have also had the opportunity to develop my skills in multi-agency working as the nature of the work has enabled me to work closely with housing, health, education, benefits, social services, for example, as well as with immigration and interpreting services.

START has enabled me to recognise the huge uncertainty that surrounds the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. The most difficult aspect of working at START for me was my difficulty to come to terms with the way refugees and asylum seekers are treated within this society. Witnessing the levels of discrimination present when someone is seeking refuge in this country horrified me. Therefore what I take with me into my future practice is an aim to minimise power differences between worker and service users, and to ensure that honesty and trust are in place. The work on this placement, although difficult, was extremely rewarding and something which has been of great value to me, both professionally and personally. Due to START’s flexibility in offering students placements from different countries and disciplines, the rich learning environment is one that I have enjoyed thoroughly.

I recently read an article which portrayed voluntary setting placements to be a waste of time as far as student learning is concerned. I think my account demonstrates how wrong this statement is. It also suggests how unique START is to student learning, the community and most importantly the refugees and asylum seekers who receive and are the focus of the service provided. I am very grateful to have been a part of this remarkable project, and the excellent community development work which is undertaken.

The Manager’s Perspective
I started placement in 2003 with a desire to learn more about multiple disadvantages in addition to promoting racial equality and community cohesion. I was naïve to the breadth of experience, learning and knowledge I was to encounter at the start of my qualified social work practice.
The core work at START during my time as a student was case work and the absence of a social work organisational framework offered a challenge which was addressed during this placement. In order to offer a home visiting service a holistic assessment to families, unaccompanied young people and individuals it was necessary to draft and devise a suite of papers encompassing a needs led assessment which focused on the ecological perspective (Jack, 2002). Research had proved that there was no shortage of guidelines for social workers on how to approach their work in cases where children are 'at risk' and need of protection if the people you are working with are from white indigenous population. What we as students were confronted with was social work across racial, cultural and language differences where we as the workers were white and English speaking, working with black service users who may have no English or for whom English is a second language sometimes recently acquired.

It was also important to examine issues of racism and power relationships between the white social work student and the service user group whom, we clearly had identified by their very nature, are one of the most marginalised groups in society (Humphries, 2004). Huby and Salking (1990) argue that it is the professional’s responsibility to make sure that the service provided does not add to the service user’s experience of being devalued because of skin colour, language or origin. Very early on in the placement, we were aware that we needed to work in a ‘culturally sensitive’ and anti-racist way which involved being aware of one’s own cultural background, religious beliefs and ‘race’. As a student it was necessary to grapple with our own value base and accept that values are not formed in a vacuum (Shardlow, 1998) Acknowledging our own place in society, the privileges we have, the oppressions we may experience, enables us as individuals to move on to working in a way that is less likely to abuse our power. Shardlow (1998) asserts that getting to grips with values is rather like ‘grappling with a slippery fish’, values are difficult to grasp because they are constantly changing.

This placement required and enabled me to build good working relationships with service users regardless of their age, cultural and religious backgrounds. Initially I was apprehensive about how I would communicate with service users with little or no English but my concerns were unfounded. I rapidly learnt to adapt my own language
and deliver advice in clear and concise statements free from jargon. I had to learn how to work with interpreters and to make decisions about when it is appropriate to use them. An essential prerequisite for social work practice is communication. What follows is an illustration of seeking a medium of communication in order to enter a child’s world.

Rutter (2003) asserts leisure, library and arts are important for asylum seekers and refugees and that they should have equal access to leisure and library services. This learning gave me the inspiration to visit the City library which brought me into contact with racism and discrimination. I had to be a strong advocate for a Bangladesh family whose right to equality I supported and challenged the oppression. Today, all family members freely use the library and access books, CDs and Internet access.

Rutter writes significantly about the positive interaction of arts and as a direct response I had the inspiration to take four refugee children to the City museum to experience the ‘Weird Bug’ exhibition. This provided a range of memorable experiences, that I shall hold for a long time. We shared the experience of eating chocolate ants, and lava in their shells. It was a great opportunity to focus on ‘direct work’. Aldgate (1988) advocates social work as building bridges to communicate with children. Bug eating was a phenomenal experience to facilitate building bridges and promoting art as a medium for communication.

My commitment to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice has been reinforced beyond my wildest dreams by witnessing first hand the discrimination and racism facing asylum seekers and refugees. This final placement certainly illustrated that this group of vulnerable people are among the most marginalised and disadvantaged members of society. The knowledge and experience I have gained are transferable to all social work arenas. Unfortunately, people who seek help from social workers do so as a direct result of oppression and injustice.

In June 2003 I wrote this placement has been an invaluable experience that has provided me with a platform to launch into social work practice to infinity and beyond! Little did I know what this final sentence would mean?
My final placement ended in June 2003. In July 2003 I was appointed temporary transitional worker until further funding was identified. September 2003 I was employed at START as Social Work supervisor, September 2004 joint project manager, and in September 2005 I was appointed the manager at START.

Since June 2003 the START organisation has grown from a small ‘virtual’ organisation (Hatch, 1997) staffed only by two social work students, to a registered charity employing health and social care staff who supervise students from increasingly diverse professions to learn through service provision.

The rapid growth and fast development has not come without its difficulties, accolades, organisational and professional cultural complexities. START currently employs eight staff and supports 15 students to facilitate our core work. START was created in 2001 when it was very much a virtual organisation in an embryonic state with a steering group and one of the founders holding the Chair position. I accept that, as one of the pro-active founder students, I hold a strong sense of ownership. Inextricably linked with the chair’s sense of protective ownership, this has at times presented complexities with two strong individuals who find it difficult to delegate. In terms of organisational life cycles (Daft, 1994), START is without doubt in a transitional stage of an organisation between birth and youth. In this phase the founder has to delegate some authority and let go of the anchor to develop an inner circle of trusted staff.

In order to move START forward a comprehensive series of systems, policies and procedures has been formally presented to the board of Trustees, accepted or rejected and re-written and implemented. Thus the division of labour has been shared. The organisation received charity status in 2005 and the mission statement is ‘To work in partnership with families, individuals and organisations to facilitate the transition of refugees from people in need to self-reliant contributors to their local community’. To achieve this mission START staff, students and Trustees proposed core principles which are inextricably linked to the organisational philosophy and the Charitable Objects. These were created through a structured decision making process (Hudson, 1999). The reason for these processes is that START is a charity with limited funding and the income we receive is not solely from government or lottery funding.
The ‘Cultural Kitchen’ and ‘Cultural Celebrations’ were two projects launched in June 2003 as part of my final placement. Today both these projects are run by refugees and asylum seekers, financed and supported by START workers and students. These proactive projects are highly pro-active visible community events that socially include asylum seekers and refugees in the city.

A small group of lone parents whom received a service from START in 2003 – 2004 now pro-actively work as volunteers at START supporting our Allotment Project and the home furnishings project ‘soft creations’ service users meet once a week to create and design soft furnishings for their homes and others.

As a needs led organisation we seek to promote a strengths approach and support refugees and asylum seekers to become self reliant contributors of their community by removing risk and vulnerability and promoting positive outcomes for ‘children in need’ and their families. Gilligan (2002) promotes good experiences are important when many other aspects of family life may be in chaos or problems feel insurmountable. To promote their development children need people who have a partisan commitment to their well being. START’s core work has had and continues to have significant and special importance to those individuals who have suffered enormous loss, separation and trauma. Some people who have received a service from START actually state that START is their family.

Not only has the service user group gone though a transitional process, I also have had a steep transitional opportunity firstly as a student in 2003 though to the manager in 2005. I feel that START has given me the opportunity to launch to infinity and beyond. Those values, skills and knowledge I learnt have been transferable to management and START as a learning organisation has provided me with the opportunity to further my studies directed in business management to enable me, the staff and the board of directors to take START forward as a creative organisation working outside the box.

Comment
There is an established tradition of University academics’ involvement in community agencies: supporting them through committee involvement, research and activism.
Indeed community involvement and support is an aspect of the mission statement of most Universities. Similarly, students on professional programmes are required to learn practice skills in service delivery settings, a fact that ensures a consistent co-operative relationship between agencies and academic institutions. However, these relationships are not always concerned with creating new knowledge or challenging orthodoxies. In many professional practice settings in the UK students are taught by established practitioners to maintain rather than challenge existing practices, in a process of 'domestication' (Freire, 1972). There is substantial research showing that maintaining the status quo in work with asylum seekers and refugees is to perpetuate the denial of human rights to this group (Christie, 2003, Cohen, 2004) and it may be the case that this is equally true of other groups.

I believe that our responsibility as educators is to enable students to realise their own potential and to develop a critical position in relation to both existing social provision and also to the educational process. Mike Nary's work 'FKUC' (2005) with Sociology students who worked alongside young offenders to help them achieve their ambition is an example of this radical position in education. However, space within Higher Education institutions to support such social innovations is in no way assured. Although there are many international examples of students making a significant difference in communities, in the UK there are indications that the space within academic institutions required for this activity is being reduced through marketization (Levidow, 2002) and 'enclosure' (Hardie, 2004), or the control of academics' time and space through quality assurance processes. Under these circumstances it is a challenge to maintain the tradition that universities are sites for creating new knowledge and possibilities. At this time of increasing social exclusion however, there are opportunities in the field of health and social care for research, analysis and action. As is evident from this particular example, such an approach offers learning opportunities for everyone involved. All three perspectives in the paper show a strong engagement in learning and in creating new possibilities. This is particularly illustrated by the service user's explanation of taking up an administration course and the paper concludes with her voice:

'I want to do it because I want to work with a cultural association so I need to go to college and get some qualifications and I thought about what can I do to help me with this. I came into START to do my placement because
START is my first family, my first contact and all I do began at START. I knew nothing or anybody until I came to START. So I spoke to John to see if I could come here for my course and here I am!' (Correia).

References


FKUC (2005) http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/fkuc/


Supporting Asylum Seekers: Practice and Ethical Issues for Health and Welfare Professionals

Dr. Beth Humphries
writer and researcher, UK

Introduction
We have heard throughout the conference of experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, both in their attempts to enter countries of refuge, and in their treatment after entry – that is, both external and internal controls. External controls are relatively recent, having been introduced in Ireland in the 1930s and a bit earlier in the UK at the turn of the 20th century. So we must not assume that external restrictions have always existed. They have been instigated by governments partly for economic reasons, partly for nationalistic reasons. My talk today will focus primarily on internal controls, but at the start I must declare my position and beliefs about external controls, because all I have to say will be coloured by my wider perspective. I do not accept the commonsense position that we must have immigration controls, that otherwise our countries would be flooded with people from all over the world, especially from poor, developing countries, who would take our jobs, drain our welfare systems dry and cause massive social upheaval in the form of racial unrest. I do not believe that immigration controls are necessary or even workable, or that people would swarm to western countries from the developing world if they were removed. Immigration controls depend on a process of racialisation of peoples who are regarded as ‘other’, as ‘not like’ us and therefore a contaminating influence. Underpinning them are imaginary distinctions between ‘native’ and ‘foreigner’, ‘citizen’ and ‘alien’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, and along with these binaries are others: ‘civilised/uncivilised’, ‘cultured/primitive’, ‘rational/emotional’, all of which construct the ‘other’ as a threat and as inferior. Immigration policies hold a notion of a homogeneous community, where we are all of the same stock, the same blood, and they occlude the reality that most countries are made up of a rich mixture of peoples from very different origins. The justification for border controls depends on the persuasiveness of these inclusionary and exclusionary nationalist and racially informed arguments. In my view there can never be ‘fair’, non-racist immigration controls.