“My Contributions made a Significant Difference”: Young Carer’s Reflections on their Participation in Social Work Admissions

Abstract

Whilst the participation of service users and carers (SUCs) in Social Work admissions (SWA) has significantly developed over the past decades, concerns have been raised about the tokenistic nature of SUC involvement (Barnes et al, 2000; Weber et al, 2012) particularly in relation to young people (YP). Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in partnership with Barnardo’s Action with Young Carers Liverpool (BAWYC) have worked to develop meaningful participation for YP in SWA. In this paper we discuss our approach to YPs participation, exploring their experiences of involvement. Using a co-production approach, drawing on participatory action research methodology, we utilise in depth interviews from a purposive sample of YCs to ask questions about the nature of YPs participation including: how meaningful they consider their involvement; what are the outcomes and benefits, and what are the continuing barriers? Adopting a reflective thematic analysis, research findings indicate that YCs feel valued and respected in their SWA role, and surprised at the level of involvement and decision making ascribed to them. They report personal development and feelings of self-worth and increased confidence, helping them to consider their own futures in a more aspirational way.

Key words: Co-production, relationship building, service user and carer involvement, social work admissions young carers, young people.

Teaser Text

This paper focuses on how we work with young people to involve them in our selection process for social work candidates on our social work programme. We highlight the changing social work professional and legislative requirements making the participation of service users and carers mandatory, and reflect on the limited participation of young people in this area. We discuss how we work in partnership with young carers, as a unique group of young people supported by the young carers' agency, to allow for meaningful involvement.

Young carers were interviewed about their experiences of involvement in the admissions work to ascertain the benefits and challenges of participation. Findings highlight that:

- Involvement provided personal and professional development
- Investing in involvement work takes time in order to build and develop positive and respectful relationships
- Young people felt confident and inspired to join local service user and carer networks giving them further involvement opportunities
- Involvement helped to raise young carers' education and career aspirations
- Young carers felt their insights and knowledge from their caring roles were valued
- Young carers were able to get an insight into the interview process for the future
- Young carers reported positive experiences of their involvement and an increase in confidence

Introduction

New and changing regulatory and curricula requirements (HCPC, 2014; SWE, 2021) require functional and meaningful engagement with SUCs, including the selection of students to become social workers. Involvement practice in SWA has varied, from co-production approaches where SUC are involved in the design and development of processes, to more direct participation in decision making and scoring of candidates (Cree et al, 2018).

Whilst overall SUC involvement in social work education has provided opportunities to reframe, redefine and rebalance power relationships (Fox, 2015), there is ongoing debate regarding how participation can effectively work in organisational cultures which may not sufficiently recognise the power differentials between professional agendas and SUC groups (Beresford and Carr, 2012, and Scheyett and Kim, 2004). Minoritized and seldom heard groups can be excluded from participating within 'available' pools of SUCs (Tanner et al, 2017), and this ongoing lack of diversity in SUCs involvement, particularly in relation to YP, remains an issue (Burke and Newman, 2020).

The admissions team at LJMU has sought over time, to develop an infrastructure supporting meaningful involvement of SUCs, reflecting key social work values of social justice and empowerment. This paper builds on existing research and practice by reporting on YP's experiences of their involvement.

Background

The available literature on the evaluation of approaches and the longer term impact of SUC involvement practices in SWA is relatively limited. (Weber et al, 2012). The focus is primarily on adult SUCs, concluding that they are making good and useful contributions to selection processes (Dillon, 2007; Robinson and Webber, 2012; Taylor and Le Riche, 2006).

As experts by experience, and providers of care, SUCs bring valuable insights (Matka et al, 2010) and experiential wisdom (Fox, 2015) to the assessment of candidates' abilities to undertake the complexities of social work roles. Whilst SUCs views tend to be comparable to those of academic staff, they can validate professional and academic views, offering a 'reality check' (Matka, 2010).

Our experience reflects this, with SUC insights being particularly helpful in assessing relationship focused skills and qualities, including warmth, empathy, patience and caring. These are widely documented as being highly valued by SUC (Howe, 2008 and Mcleod, 2010). Areas more commonly 'overlooked' by academic staff (Cree et al, 2018 p.418).

Particular Insights of Young People

Concurrent to the developing discourse around adult SUC involvement, there is growing debate around YPs participation in health and social care, and of developing this in a strategic and systematic way (Brady, 2017; UN General Assembly, 1989).

This **r**eflects the changing context of YP as active agents in their own right, rather than passive recipients of adult worlds (McLaughlin, 2007; Powell et al, 2009). UNICEF (2017) proposes that opportunities must facilitate YP expressing their views on matters of relevance to their lives, enabling them to draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities, building on the information and insights about their own lives, communities and issues affecting them. However, YP are not homogenous, with some afforded less opportunity and agency to participate than others, whilst having valuable contributions to make. YCs, as a distinct group of YP bring unique ontological insights, or 'experiential based knowledge,' due to their intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) circumstances, social positioning and lived experiences of participation in services encountered by their families (Scottish Government,

2010, p.7). SU standpoint theory (McLaughlin, 2009) provides some understanding of how being a social work recipient develops such insights.

Benefits and challenges of participation for young people

Many benefits of participation in SWA for adult SUCs are applicable to YP, including involvement with a wider benefit by influencing decision making, and gratification from improving the quality of future social workers. YP particularly benefit from the impact on confidence and self-worth (Sinclair, 2004), the 'acquisition of skills, a sense of ownership and belonging**,** and increased levels of empathy and responsibility (Shier, 2001. p. 114). Working collaboratively alongside university staff to assess candidates, can give SUCs a strong sense of being valued (Cree et al, 2018 p. 498; Pritzker et al, 2016), impacting on personal and professional development in the short and longer term.

Opportunities to gain and improve skills for future educational and career aspirations (Branfield, 2009; Matka et al, 2010; and Phelps, 2017) are highly relevant to YCs, less likely to be in education, employment and training, and more likely to experience poorer health and well-being than other YP (Audit Commission, 2010; Barnardos, 2017; and Hounsell, 2013).

YC's education and career aspirations are influenced by often challenging experiences of navigating school and beyond, within a system that doesn't always recognise or support their lived experiences (Barnardos, 2017). Opportunities to participate requires a centralisation of the utility of caring roles as lived experience, as the key asset YCs bring in their value in SWA and interaction with education.

The practical and philosophical challenges of adult SUC involvement, including the complications, (Beresford, 2013) inconsistencies and variations of implementation, are also

experienced by young SUCs. Particular challenges relate to payment, accessibility, training and support, and clarity about roles and expectations (Branfield, 2009). Such difficulties exist within academic cultures and organisations that do not always understand and value SUC insights and knowledge, (Beresford and Boxall, 2012) potentially resulting in further experiences of inequality, exclusion and tokenism for SUCs (Burke and Newman, 2020; Cowden and Singh, 2007).

Clearly, organisations have a duty of care to participating SUCs, particularly those considered 'vulnerable' due to their SUC positioning. This is particularly relevant for YP, whose vulnerabilities may be viewed as 'structural', having to contend with a hierarchy of gatekeepers and increasing the potential barriers to participation (Powell et al, 2009). The importance of actively engaging YP from diverse social backgrounds to participate is important. If this does not take place, YP from minoritised communities may have less opportunities and be less confident to participate. YPs involvement requires complimentary and different approaches to adult involvement (Brady, 2018 and Kellett, 2005). Supporting and preparing young SUCs for their involvement roles, so that expectations and responsibilities are clearly defined, understood and respected, is fundamental to meaningful participation (Matka et al, 2010).

Facilitating and supporting the meaningful participation of young people

Significant regional variations have been identified as to how well SUCs are supported in their roles in SWA (Robinson and Webber, 2013). Support relating to adequate preparation, individual needs and the assessment of candidate's capabilities is crucial to prevent professionally flawed and tokenistic involvement (Beresford and Carr,2012).

A co-production, anti-oppressive, relationship focused approach (MacDermott et al, 2020) is critical to building honest and respectful relationships (Howe, 2008) with YP, facilitated by close partnership working with the expertise of YPs support organisations. This approach focuses on capabilities and strengths (Howe, 2008; Saleebey, 2013 and Fox, 2015) whist taking account of adult / YP power differentials (McLaughlin, 2007; Burke et al, 2020). Time is a key factor to facilitate the development of relationships in order to enable meaningful engagement (Newman, 2010) with YP before, during and after their involvement work. This requires self-reflexive University staff who are invested and committed to working alongside YP, and are able to adapt their communication style when required (MacDermott et al, 2020**)**.

A case in point for this paper is to ascertain effective engagement and involvement practices with YP in SWA work determining what, if anything, they gain from their involvement.

Social Work Admissions Participation and Involvement Approach at the University

LJMU supports two to four YCs each year to participate in SWA. While preparation and support processes mirror that of adult SUCs, we have made changes to take account of the different and additional needs of YP (Brady, 2018). This has been achieved over time by working collaboratively with BAWYC to enable meaningful participation, using the nine Participation Standards and child's rights based approach to participation developed by UNICEF (2017).

The aim is for the YCs to have positive and meaningful experiences, and the objectives reflect Barnardo's Support Plan outcomes for YCs including: reducing the negative impact of caring; contributing to planning and decision making; improving health and wellbeing; juggling education with caring and enabling more opportunity for activity away from caring.

The ethical implications of involvement, and shared duty of care for both organisations have been discussed (Burke and Newman, 2020). The child's rights based approach to safeguarding captures all the considerations taken to promote the wellbeing of the YP; a safe space where YP are confident about the atmosphere of respect and support that will underpin their involvement (UNICEF, 2017).

For the YCs contributions to be of value, the experience needs to be both challenging and interesting, although not so challenging that risk would be negatively experienced. SWA involvement was considered to be a 'calculated risk' (Burke and Newman, 2020, p.7), with risk mitigation strategies fully discussed and developed accordingly, drawing on Tronto's 4 components of care ethics (Tronto, 2005) to support the conditions for meaningful and ethical

involvement.

A child's rights based approach to involvement requires time to listen to YP about how they want to participate, considering any potential barriers to participation. Engagement with the YP begins before the assessment day to prepare for their role. They attend an informal briefing session at the University with their project worker (PW), at a time that suits them. This is distinct from the adult SUC briefing, and the YP meet with the University Panel Members (UPM) they will be working with, who have a working relationship with BAWYCs and are conversant with YC issues. This important element of the engagement process allows the UPM and YP time to get to know each other and start building their relationship (MacDermott et al, 2020).

The YP are familiarised with the assessment processes (for example, written task, group work and individual interview) their role and expectations. Time and encouragement is

given to express concerns, ask questions, discuss individual support needs and get a feel for the University environment. The YP are supported to register as members of a local SUC forum, independently of the BAWYC, to enable payment for their work. This forum also provides further participation opportunities for the YP after their SWA involvement.

Relationships continue to develop during the assessment day as panel members work closely together, with ongoing support provided for the YP in their role, and they are encouraged to ask questions and to voice any concerns. They can observe and learn from the UPM's approach, and in their interactions when discussing assessments of candidates. A debrief happens at the end of the assessment day and both verbal and written feedback is provided to the YP and the YP contribute to an annual review of the SWA process.

For a detailed description of the approach underpinning the admissions work see Burke and Newman, 2020).

Methodology

We worked collaboratively, taking a co-production approach (Newman et al, 2016; Wallcroft et al, 2012 and SCIE, 2015) to establish the research design.

A qualitative approach underpinned by anti-oppressive methodology (Newman et al, 2016 and Strier, 2006) was used with in depth interviews allowing for greater depth of reflection (Bryman, 2016) and exploration of the YP's experience of involvement. We drew on elements of participatory action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2003) which helped to provide insights and learning for the University when undertaking future participation work with YP. To ascertain how meaningful their involvement experience had been, we asked the YP questions about what had been important about being involved, how they had

experienced involvement and working with the University, and their thoughts on future education and career aspirations.

Participants were interviewed by their BAWYC PW, which was considered more conducive to them offering open and honest accounts of their experiences, rather than being interviewed by a UPM involved in SWA. Interviews took place at BAWYC, chosen by the YP as a familiar and comfortable setting.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be supported by BAWYC and to have participated in at least one of the SWA days. A purposive sample (Davies, 2014) was sought, resulting in six in-depth interviews over time. Participants were aged between 16 and 23, all having negatively impacting caring responsibilities for an adult.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted from the University Research Ethics Committee. Working sensitively and safely (SCIE, 2004; Brady, 2017 and McLaughlin, 2007) within a framework of a shared duty of care was a key factor in the admissions work and the research. Participants provided verbal consent to being interviewed and were made aware of their right to withdraw consent at any time during the data collection stage of the research. In order to respect confidentiality, identifiable details of the YP have been omitted from the paper. Support was available from BAWYC after the interview if participants required this.

Data management and analysis

Interviews took place over two consecutive years of SWA involvement, to allow for six YP to be interviewed, recorded on a password protected device, with the YPs consent. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and a reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was

undertaken. While the identified research outcomes were taken as a basis for our questions (see questions above), our approach ensured the flexibility to identify emergent themes from the data. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their identities.

Findings

Getting started – preparing and connecting

Meaningful participation is facilitated within child-friendly environments using approaches adapted to YPs capacities, and sufficient time and resources given to ensuring YP are adequately prepared and have the confidence and opportunity to voice their perspectives (UNICEF, 2017). YCs were clear that the assessment briefing session had helped to alleviate concerns about their role and expectations. This was the first time most of the YP had visited a University, and had been a daunting prospect, even when supported by their PW. Meeting the UPM at the briefing session meant that rapport was starting to be built. Hannah recounted:

> *I did feel prepared because we were given a booklet beforehand and also we met with B and A prior to the interview, to be more relaxed, knowing what to expect. You're not having to get to know the interviewer that you're working with; you feel like you already know and connect with them a bit better (Hannah).*

This first meeting was an important start to building a relationship with the UPM. Michelle reported feeling less nervous on the assessment day as the UPM met her at the entrance of the University building:

It made me feel more comfortable as I knew who I'd be working with…and she said she would meet me earlier on the actual (assessment) day, so we could sit down and speak about stuff. I had a coffee with her. So that just made me feel more comfortable and relaxed about what we'd be doing (Michelle).

Building relationships and working as a team

The requirement for panel members to work effectively together as a team, in a professional capacity for six intense hours on SWA days, requires developing positive relationships within a short space of time. Taking time getting to know the YP and identifying individual needs was important. Interactions between panel members in between assessments, the 'small talk,' helped to break down barriers, allowing the YP and UPM to be defined outside their caring and academic roles. It helped foster a sense of trust in the partnership with the YP, who had put their confidence and belief in the UPM to support them through the process. Melanie reflected:

We went through the whole process and I had like a little cup of tea and everything, we spoke about everything not just about the interview but other things which you know, things that mattered to us…..we had a break and I spoke to A about the Unis I'd applied for. (Melanie)

The YP were mindful of the importance of this albeit short relationship, in terms of panel members worked together, and how this could impact on candidates. Danielle reflected:

We got along well, and I think that was really important because the candidates may have been able to pick up on that; we were interviewing as a team, not as individuals. (Danielle).

Some participants had concerns about the expectations of assessing candidates, and were initially unsure how they would voice their opinions. It was evident that their confidence increased as the day progressed, and relationships developed, they began to settle into the process. Hannah commented:

> *One of the things I was worried about was my opinion… I thought I'd be too nervous and shy to voice my opinion, but I felt fine doing it (Hannah).*

Melanie reported feeling more at ease in her role as the day progressed, reflecting how doing something for herself, in her own right, made her feel appreciated and valued:

> *I felt comfortable as it was about myself – it was about me and it was really good* (Melanie).

Just being asked to participate in SWA gave participants a sense of mattering; that their views were important, that the UPM and their PW believed in them and were confident that they had the necessary skills and abilities.

Danielle recounted being encouraged to voice her opinions, even if they were different from the views of the UPM*:*

> *She (UPM) said feel free to have different opinions, and that's what they wanted, so I felt I could do that (Danielle).*

It became clear to participants that panel decisions would impact on candidates' futures. Realising the power of their decision making heightened the YPs awareness of the responsibility of their role. Zoe recognised feeling *quite nervous* acknowledging, *it's people's futures.*

Similarly, Michelle hadn't expected to have such an influence on decision making, despite attending the briefing session:

> *I thought I'd be observing – didn't realise I would actually be interviewing, big shock, but it made me feel good as I would be interviewing, but quite scary as their (candidate) career would be in my hands (Michelle)*

Exercising power and agency in decision making in this way was clearly unfamiliar for the YP, and didn't initially sit comfortably, presenting some challenges. They took their decision making seriously, as they became aware that their opinions had consequences, potentially making a difference to candidate outcomes.

> *Before I got there, I expected my role to not be as significant, more as an observer. But as the day went on, I realised that my opinion was really valued so I felt really involved in the process, and that my contributions made a significant difference as to whether people get put forward or not (Michelle).*

Having their opinions valued by UPMs, made the YPs contributions feel important. Danielle felt validated, both on a personal level and in her caring role, aware of the particular ontological insights she brought to her role:

> *Being valued; my opinion, but also my personal experience of being a carer, which is sometimes not valued in the worlds of employment and things. But I could bring my personal experience, not as a professional, but some qualification to influence the decisions. I felt like a big part of it. I felt good about the fact that I was trusted to be able to have an opinion for someone's life* (Danielle).

The YP observed how candidates' experiences of informal caring were considered by UPMs to be relevant and valuable experience for undertaking social work training. This may have helped to validate both their own experiences and subsequent insights of caring, helping them to recognise the different and complementary insights brought to the assessment process. Lauren reflected:

> *B was looking at it as an educator. I was looking at it from a different point of view. I think we worked well together because B had all the academic knowledge to assess the candidates; she knows what the course entails, but I have worked with social workers and have a unique insight into how their qualities would match up (Lauren).*

Two of the YP identified how both verbal and non-verbal interactions from candidates fostered a sense of their importance as panel members. Melanie reflected on the impact of being noticed:

> *Being involved, it was just a brilliant experience and made me feel good and noticed and stuff, like when I was speaking to the people I was interviewing, they just were looking at me and both of us when they were speaking and made me feel important (Melanie).*

She further reflected on one candidate's question to her at the end of the individual interview. This was unusual and the UPM had checked whether Melanie was comfortable responding:

There was one person who near the end asked me about my experience about being a carer, and it just made me feel even more important and involved more…….it was very good yeah (Melanie).

The YP spoke at length about feeling treated as equal partners:

When we all met up for the interviews, the way she spoke to us was like equal. We were treated as one of them really, as staff, from the word 'go' so that made me feel like I was on a level with all of them (Michelle).

Participating in all three elements of the assessment day (written task, observed group work and individual interview) was experienced as empowering, given that YPs capacity can often be underestimated, resulting in feelings of disempowerment (Brady, 2018). Danielle stated:

It was good to have your opinion known as a YP, as a lot of the time we are not treated as the same as adults, as we are seen as younger and not as mature and stuff, so it's good to have my opinion up there and for someone to understand it. (Danielle)

Melanie echoed this sentiment speaking about the importance of having her differing needs as a young adult being recognised by UPMs conversant with working with YP:

The staff treat you like you're a grown up, and listen to you. But not too much; they know you're still only a teenager, which is important. (Melanie).

Learning from the experience and thinking about the future

Evidencing their decision making introduced the YP to important transferable skills:

B understood there are different sides to it, but she wanted to hear my opinion on it to understand why I thought this way. I liked the fact that I am allowed to

have an opinion on stuff and it's not just my opinion, she is helping me to add to it or where I could have gone wrong on certain parts (Zoe).

Whilst panel members tended to give candidates similar scores, as reflected in the literature (Matka, 2010), creating an environment that facilitated honest and respectful discussions was important:

Scoring, we were levelling up on both our scores so both making opinions and it was dead good as we listened to each other and what we had scored (Lauren).

There were many reflections on how the experience had helped to demystify interview processes, providing insights for future job, College and University interviews. The interview process was seen from 'the inside', highlighting interviewers' expectations from candidates:

I'd be a lot less shy in interviews; I think I'd feel more comfortable now I know what people look for. It's probably helped me for when I need to go for an interview (Danielle).

This insider experience gave some participants the impetus to explore applying for University or College in the future, something they may not have previously considered a reality. Subsequently, it was also helpful for the YP to see the range and diversity of candidates being interviewed:

Now that I've met some people who go on degrees, I would consider going to college or Uni myself. They're mostly like me (except the older ones). I've never went in a Uni before and it's quite scary but it's ok when you get to know it (Zoe).

Interviewing candidates '*like me*' was important in relation to self-efficacy and vision. For YCs, this knowledge helped to view Further or Higher education as a real possibility.

However, one YC finding that SWA involvement had positively challenged her on an intellectual level, had previously withdrawn from her University place to care for her parent**.** Of concern here, is the level of support available for YCs at University. This can be variable (Kettel, 2018), despite the Care Act, 2014 requirements for young adult carers to be supported in their transitions to participate in higher education. All participants spoke about the overall confidence boost they gained from SWA. For some, the boost was general:

*Now I've got confidence; I never thought I'd be able to do anything like that and I was really nervous before I was going to do it. It's another thing for a confidence boost for me (Lauren).*For others it was more related to their career or educational aspirations:

> *It's made me feel more confident and able to apply not just to University but also job interviews as well. Seeing the different candidates and different abilities; the interview skills. I know what comes across well now. I've learned that confidence does favour a decision sometimes. I'll take that on board for future job or University applications (Michelle).*

Another YP reflected on how learning to present in a confident, professional manner despite initial nervousness in her assessor role would be helpful in the future:

> *I was so nervous that I thought I wouldn't be able to speak, but I had to get over that because the student was even more nervous than me and I had to help them feel comfortable. It's a good skill that I've learnt ....pretending to be confident when you're not. Really, I think it will help me in the future (Zoe).*

These comments illustrate the YPs ability to be reflexive and empathic, considering their impact on candidates. There were two distinctly different reflections here. Melanie stated:

If I'm more comfortable the students see me more relaxed and they are then more relaxed. Important for candidates as well. (Melanie).

However, Michelle had a different perspective:

I think it must have been more relaxing for the interviewees to see I was nervous as well at interviewing them (Michelle).

Michelle reflected how both verbal feedback during the day, and written feedback sent through the PW had been incorporated into Michelle's University reference. This is significant for those YCs unable to rely on school references, when school attendance had been impacted by caring responsibilities.

After the assessment day B sent out a feedback letter regarding how I did as I can use this when applying for other things, and I can learn from this to see what I can do to improve….. overall the experience was brilliant and it helped me get my place in University (Michelle).

Discussion

YCs involvement in SWA brought valuable insights, benefitting them in a number of ways. They reported the experience being positive and meaningful, with much personal development, increased self-confidence and self-worth, agency and self-advocacy during the assessment day and beyond. YCs particularly valued having space to help develop a sense of self, defining them away from caring responsibilities (Pritzer, 2016) and providing opportunities to consider future educational and career aspirations. It was also a stepping stone to broaden professional networks, becoming part of a wider SUC community influencing social work education.

Reported benefits contributed to meeting the more specific SWA involvement outcomes of: reducing the negative impact of caring; contributing to planning and decision making; improving health and wellbeing; juggling education with caring and enabling more opportunity for activity away from caring.

Reducing the negative impact of caring and juggling education with caring

Whilst the YCs reported positive and negative features of caring, the experience of young adult carer's vocational aspirations 'tempered' by balancing caring responsibilities appears not uncommon (Kettell, 2018,pp.10). Viewing caring as separate from and needing to be 'juggled' with education can be problematic, stemming from an individualistic culture where care is commodified, rendering it of low financial value. This can minimise the contribution of caring to educational achievement, significantly impacting on YCs sense of self-worth, and the value that they and others (including the providers of education) attribute to such primary skills and qualities.

These very same skills and qualities were considered as having value in the SWA work, contributing to YP experiencing feelings of importance, mattering and being appreciated. This impacted on their confidence and self-worth, and helping to re-frame self-identity (Rosenberg et al, 1981).

This increase in confidence has had a transformational impact on both current and future education aspirations (Brainchild, 2009), helping the YCs to view future education and learning in a positive way, realising what was achievable. Educational aspirations are particularly important for YCs, whose school attendance has been impacted by caring responsibilities (Kettel, 2018). One YC had reported not attending school and hardly leaving the house, until her involvement with BAWYC. After participating in SWA and subsequent

involvement opportunities, she was confident to enrol at college, hoping to become a nurse. It is worth noting that where YCs primary skills and qualities are given educational value, it is usually associated with learning leading to caring and less financially rewarding careers. These skills and qualities also make them perfect accountants, actors or lawyers as well as health and social care professionals.

Assessing candidates from different social backgrounds provided insights the diversity of students attending University, helping some YCs to see themselves in that position. However, research indicates that despite inclusive admissions practices, University students from under-represented groups commonly experience a sense of isolation and not belonging (Cropper, 2000; Read et al, 2003; Rosenberg et al, 1981 and Tovar, 2013), and continued targeted support might be necessary to support their meaningful participation.

Contributing to planning and decision making

Learning gained from SWA involvement appeared to have far reaching personal and professional implications for many of the YP. It gave them an opportunity to contribute to decision making outside, but related to their caring roles, giving a different sense of agency (Beresford, 2010). They were able to consolidate valuable knowledge and skills acquired in their caring roles, including problem solving and liaising with professionals, (Scottish Government, 2010), and to further develop skills (Matka, 2010)

Improving Health and Wellbeing and Future Aspirations

Involvement opened up further opportunities for the YCs, independent of BAWYC. Their membership of local SUC Involvement organisations as a result of their SWA work provided access to a wider network of SUCs, opening up further involvement opportunities. These

include SWA, co-facilitating SWA briefing and training sessions for YP and adult SUCs with the University, contributing to social work curriculum development and teaching on local social work programmes. One YP become involved with a strategic process in a Local Authority, and gained membership of a panel assessing funding applications.

The involvement of YP from diverse social backgrounds in SWA and social work education needs prioritising to ensure the voices of under-represented YP are heard. Organisational cultures have led to an admissions process that presents barriers for many YP including those whose first language is not English, who are at school on SWA days, and whose disability requires additional resources. Adopting creative, flexible and meaningful involvement approaches that meet diverse needs is challenging, but is necessary.

Limitations of the study

Whilst the research participants constituted a diverse group in relation to age, social background and caring experiences, they were all white, British and female.

UNICEF's (2017) 'Inclusive' standard proposes that participation must avoid existing patterns of discrimination, encouraging opportunities for marginalised YP to be involved, providing equality of opportunity for all. Equality of opportunity is limited in this case, by the need for capacity and maturity to participate in SWA, and as admissions processes are already defined by Universities, 'capacity and maturity' are regarded in relation to this.

YCs involved with SWA over the years, have also been male, and/or LGBTQ+. However, of specific concern is that male, younger and Black YCs are under-represented, even taking into account the population of YCs involved with BAWYC.

Conversations with YCs not included in the research (and whose voices are not represented in this paper) suggest that non-involvement includes (but is not limited to) their own choice not to be out of school for the day or by their school's decision not to allow them time off.

Conclusion

The findings show that the participation of YP in SWA requires both similar and different approaches to those commonly involving adult SUCs. Close, honest and meaningful collaboration with a partner organisation that knows and advocates for the YP is crucial to facilitate supportive, authentic partnerships (Brady, 2017) with individual YP. This enables participation that is relevant and meaningful. A strengths-based anti-oppressive approach, valuing YPs contributions and agency is tantamount in fostering supportive and trusting relationships with them (Powell and Smith, 2009).

Our learning has helped us further develop infrastructure for meaningful YP participation in our admissions work, and impacted our practice regarding engaging, preparing and supporting both YP and adult SUC. This will further be developed within our Covid-19 responsive online admissions process in 2021. Our research, in the light of the limited qualitative literature, is important in terms of the learning elicited from the YP involved, which can be used to support and help develop initiatives and strategies with YP in relation to SWA and beyond in HEI's both nationally and internationally.

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