What can social workers learn about community development in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to re-explore community development in the context of social work. In Northern Ireland (NI), community development is a central component of a social work student's practice placement, whereby students must evidence how they have met this. Over time, we have witnessed the reduction of community development to leaflet making (based on feedback from Practice Teachers across NI using a mentimetre tool). This article addresses what social work students and practitioners can take forward in terms of community development in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article will recap some of the relevant social and community development definitions and revisit ideas of community – we explore questions such as, who is the community, and how do people define themselves? We consider the concept of intersectionality and how it can counter the impact of negative stereotypes and 'labelling' (Crenshaw, 1991). The article will use NI as a case example to draw on COVID-19 inspired community development case studies, taking examples from practice, including work conducted online, and the role, practice, and efficacy of virtual community development during a time of physical distancing. The article will explore the history of how community development is taught and will address how we can strengthen undergraduate social work teaching and learning to better equip social workers by teaching community development knowledge and methods in line with the vision of the International Federation of Social Work (Barron and Taylor, 2010; Das et al., 2015; IFSW & IASSW, 2014; Lynch et al., 2021). We conclude that social work teaching and learning globally need to strengthen student understanding of community development beyond leaflet production to a coherent set of knowledge, skills, and values.

Keywords: community development; social work; education; COVID-19

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Introduction

Societies across the globe have observed copious experiments by communities taking action to meet their own needs. Some have worked, some have failed, and some hint at a radically different future. This thread of history has been addressed in academic papers and teaching over the years. Yet, now, more so than ever, it offers context for an urgent conversation about the role of communities today, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Oe and Weeks, 2020; Tekin and Drury, 2020; Truell and Crompton, 2020). There is no doubt that the UK and Ireland, and indeed most countries across the globe, found themselves unprepared to deal with a worldwide pandemic (BASW, 2020; Mellish et al., 2020). In fact, in the UK and Ireland, health and social care workers had to respond to unprecedented situations and adapt quickly and extensively to the health, social and economic dimensions of the crisis (Egan et al., 2020; BASW, 2020). It is timely, then, to reconsider the role of the social worker and the impact on social work training for undergraduate students in light of changes that have occurred due to the global pandemic. The crisis has exposed the fragility and injustice of many people's lives, with food banks overwhelmed and a growing reliance on welfare benefits (Capodistrias et al., 2021; Power et al., 2020). People living in overcrowded accommodations, in poverty, or insecure employment are suffering most from the disease itself, as well as from measures taken to control the pandemic (Benfer et al., 2021; Dickerson et al., 2020). The pandemic has also raised issues in relation to ageism, racism, women's rights, domestic violence, homo/transphobia, disabilities, and mental health (Buffel et al., 2021; Mukhtar, 2021). The socioeconomic fallout from COVID-19 will see an enormous divergence in employment and income security, housing, health, and education (Capodistrias et al., 2021; Power et al., 2020). Recent research has demonstrated that social workers, community workers, and voluntary and community agencies mobilised swiftly to provide immediate support to individuals and communities in need (Banks et al., 2020; Mukhtar, 2021).

The pandemic has created an opportunity, as never before, to re-explore community development in the context of social work. This article seeks to address what social work students and practitioners can take forward in terms of community development in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article will recap some of the relevant social and community development definitions and will revisit ideas of community – we explore

questions such as, who is the community, and how do people define themselves? We consider the concept of intersectionality and how it can counter the impact of negative stereotypes and 'labelling' (Crenshaw, 1991). The article will use NI (NI) as a case example to draw on COVID-19 inspired community development case studies, taking examples from practice, including work conducted online, and the role, practice, and efficacy of virtual community development during a time of physical distancing. This article addresses how we can equip social workers better by teaching community development knowledge and methods in line with the vision of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2014).

Methods

This paper will consider select literature about social work and community development. The paper will draw on findings from a Mentimeter poll (an audience response system) disseminated to practice teachers across the region of NI to gauge their views on how they meet community development requirements with social work students on their practice placement (Mayhew et al., 2020). Furthermore, the article will analyse the learning and the efficacy of community development practice examples using case studies from NI during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mentimeter

The authors, both working within the field of social work student placements and academically within the area of community development, had been aware of ancedotal feedback about the use of leaflet-making from both social work students and practice teachers relating to meeting the community development component on student practice learning (see section 'Social work training in NI). To better understand this feedback, the authors decided to investigate this further, having sought permission from the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP). The authors chose to use mentimeter as the platform to capture practice teacher views on this topic. The benefits of using mentimeter as an audience response system were plentiful, and these have been highlighted recently in the academic literature (Vallely and Gibson, 2018; Mayhew et al., 2020).

The authors chose the platform for several reasons, including the ease of access to engage with colleagues across Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT) regionally. There were no HSCT IT security restrictions on colleagues accessing and engaging with the mentimeter platform, which ensured that all HSCT colleagues could engage and interact with the platform and that all 5 HSCTs could be included in the return of results. It was helpful that the platform provides both numerical and percentage analysis of the results. The literature does point to some limitations of the platform, including that it is time sensitive (i.e., the survey set and slides are only available for a set period of time once created) however, the authors were not restricted by any time limitations of the platform (Vallely and Gibson, 2018; Mayhew et al., 2020).

The authors did identify some limitations in their methods however, for example, the mentimeter survey was only piloted with one person. A small number of participants were unclear about one question in the survey; therefore, it may have been beneficial to have expanded the pilot to more than one person (De Vaus, 1993).

Case study

The qualitative case study is a research methodology that helps in the exploration of a phenomenon within some context through various data sources, and it undertakes the exploration through a variety of lenses to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Through case study, a real-time phenomenon is explored within its naturally occurring context, with the consideration that context will create a difference (Kaarbo and Beasley, 1999). In qualitative research, the case study is one of the frequently used methodologies (Hancock and Algozzine, 2016; Yazan, 2015). A case study is about determining what the investigated case may be; it is not about defining populations and selecting appropriate samples (Sagadin 1991). A case study is usually a study of a single case or a small number of cases; therefore, the idea of representative sampling and statistical generalisations to a broader population is not possible, but an analytical methodology has been chosen instead. The two case studies in this paper have not been selected based on a representative sample, but they have been chosen because they are exciting and inspiring areas of community development and social work practice. 'Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual

cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something' (Eysenck 1976 in Flyvbjerg 2006: 224).

Social work and community development

The academic literature addresses the shared values between social work and community development. This is evident in the professional international and UK definitions. The international definition of social work highlights how social work 'engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing,' at a local, regional, or international level; the international definition of community development also promotes engagement with people and structures through communities 'whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings' (IACD, 2020).

Although the social work definition identifies social change as a key purpose of the profession, the community development definition incorporates participative democracy, sustainable development, and economic opportunity. Both social work and community development are practice-based professions and academic disciplines which promote social justice, human rights, and the empowerment of people (IFSW, 2014; Clarke, 2015; NISCC, 2019; IACD, 2020; BASW 2021).

Intersectionality

We cannot consider social work and community development with individuals, communities, and societies without also drawing on the concept of intersectionality, a theory that first emerged with black feminist scholars in the United States (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality posits that multiple categories of identity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality, ability) can overlap and intersect, culminating in interdependent systems of discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Mullaly, 2010).

As social workers, we use theories, models, and approaches such as systems theory, attachment theory, stages of development, task-centred, solution-focused, and person-centered approaches (Bowen, 1946; Bowlby, 1979; Erikson, 1959; Payne, 2005; Rogers, 1951). However, practitioners can

apply these theories and approaches without naming racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, disablism, etc.

Nayak (2021) suggests that we query where social work theories and models come from and why the most frequently used models of reflection were developed by white male scholars (i.e. Gibbs, 1988; Houston, 2015; Schon, 1983). Furthermore, Nayak (2021) highlights that the most used model of anti-discriminatory practice is Thompson's PCS model (also developed by a white male scholar). Nayak (ibid) is not questioning the content of these models nor the scholarship of their authors, but she is asking, what is absent from these models, and why? Where are the theories and models developed by those scholars on the margins?

Therefore, when intersectionality is applied to social work and community development with service users, it offers practitioners a framework that can promote a more thorough understanding of how interconnecting social identities and oppressions manifest in the everyday experiences of the people and communities they support (Nayak and Robbins, 2018). Indeed, in the NI context, intersectionality theory is helpful because it brings communities into focus and helps illuminate an understanding of intersecting dimensions of inequality and discrimination that are an integral part of divided societies in transition (Rooney, 2007).

The following section will address the historical tensions between community development and social work practice.

Historical tensions

Although community development and social work share a similar value base around participation, self, and empowerment underlying policy and practice, their relationship is complicated. Some commentators are hostile to social work, viewing it as a conservative profession (Kenny 1999). Historically, Clarke (1996) cited in Heenan and Birrell (2011), has theorised why social work and community development have had a turbulent relationship. He has addressed how the professions have failed to connect – the first reason cited is that the social work profession embraced centralisation (whereby central authorities uphold service standards, rationalise resource allocation, and coordinate local development) and an individualist case-centered professionalism – this approach was at odds with the decentralised (often said to be the counterweight to central

power) community development (Smelser and Baltes, 2001). The second reason highlighted by Clarke (1996) was that the failing welfare state, once thought to be a remedy for eradicating want (Rodger, 2000), meant that class remained an issue. It was unclear where social work stood on the issue of class conflict as a profession that 'welcomed standardisation in training and working conditions, is divided on the issue of professionalism and elitism' (Wooley, 1970 cited in Heenan, 2004:796). Community development workers were reluctant to be involved in what they viewed as elitism, preferring a hands-on approach (Heenan, 2004). The tensions between decentralised community development and social work remain today and can be found in the conflicts between and within the community sector and statutory sectors (whereby the agenda is being led by statutory agencies as opposed to community groups and service users), but as Heenan and Birrell (2011) outline, conservative and radical dimensions exist within both professions. Heenan and Birrell's analysis of the relationship between social work and community development is balanced, avoiding oversimplified statements of community development being on the left and radical and social work being on the right and conservative as they distinguish between different types of social work and community development set within specific economic, social, and political contexts, including the contested space of NI.

Current connections between community development and social work

In the UK, the connection between social work and community development has recently been strengthened by the British Association of Social workers' Code of Ethics (2021) which outlines the importance of social workers engaging in social and political action to influence policy and development, while working in partnership with communities and demonstrating a commitment to the values of human rights and social justice. The BASW Code of Ethics sets community development within the spectrum of traditional social work interventions such as clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work, and therapeutic work with families. Although the link between social work and community development is not new (Younghusband 1959), the professions have remained apart with a turbulent history dividing them, as addressed in the section above (Clarke 1996).

A key element in community development is the need for communities to set their own agenda and mobilise to take collective action to challenge unequal power relationships (ESB, 2015; DoH 2018). The reality of much social work intervention, however, is that it falls under the category of 'community-based interventions' as opposed to community development (Labonte, 1999; cited in DoH 2018: 8). This is because statutory agencies are leading the agenda as opposed to community groups and service users. Labonte (1999) contends that there is a need to revisit Tan's belief about community development which offers social workers the most practical framework for lasting change for individuals and the communities and societies in which they live as it focuses on 'the centrality of oppressed people in the process of overcoming externally imposed social problems' (Tan, 2009: 6).

Community development and social work in NI

Heenan and Birrell (2011) assessed the impact of the re-emphasis on community development perspectives in social work in NI. The concept of community development was about achieving social and political change and referred to a set of methods or ways of working with local groups to identify and tackle problems and develop evidence-based strategies. It aimed to raise capacity by giving local people the skills and knowledge to address their own needs – including the tenets of collective action, active citizenship, empowerment, participation and inclusion, and partnership.

The NI Community Development Review Group (1991) defined community development as:

> Community development in NI is a process, which embraces community action, community service and other community endeavours- whether geographical or issue based- with an emphasis towards the disadvantaged, impoverished and powerless within society. Its values include participation, empowerment and self- help. And while it is essentially about collective action, it helps realise the potential of both individuals and groups within communities (NI Community Development Review Group, 1991:2)

This is an interesting definition in so far as it recognises community development as a process incorporating a range of approaches. Within a NI context, it may have been helpful to add the concept of identity

into the definition of the community. National identity in NI is typically synonymous with a person's religion/religious background (i.e., Catholic or Protestant) or community background i.e., Nationalist/Republican (Irish) or Unionist/Loyalist (British). National identity can be a divisive concept in Northern Ireland which is part of the United Kingdom and partitioned from the Republic of Ireland.

Still, the focus on the marginalised is in tune with social work and community development, as are its values of participation, empowerment, and self-help (although it could be argued that these are methods, not values). The collective action at the heart of community development remains to this day in the Community Development National Occupational Standards (CDNOS) (UKES 2005) and the BASW Code of Ethics (2021).

Within an NI context, the Public Health Agency (PHA) has been actively promoting community development activities to mobilise communities to take more control of their health and well-being (Making Life Better 2013-2023). Still, until recently, social work's commitment has been inconsistent and sporadic. With the employment of social workers in multi-disciplinary teams aligned to GP practices following Delivering Together (DoH 2017) and the development of a post-graduate programme for social workers in community development, new opportunities are emerging to practice community development.

A recent radical proposal to include community development in social work job descriptions in adult social care is a welcome move (DoH, 2022). The limitation of this is, of course, that this is limited to adult services currently; however, Professor Ray Jones, in his review of children's services (NI) is also advocating community social work (BASW, 2022).

Social work training in NI and beyond

Barron and Taylor (2010) consider the history of community development in the social work degree curriculum in NI. The Degree in social work was introduced in 2004 to meet the requirements of the NI Social Care Council, which, along with other Councils across the UK, agreed that all social work training would be offered at the Honours degree level. Barron and Taylor (2010) highlight that this new degree in social work was an opportunity to review the contribution that community development could have to the delivery of health and social care (DHSSPS, 2003; Scottish Social Services

Council, 2003; Welsh Assembly Government, 2004; General Social Care Council, 2005). Barron and Taylor (2010) argue that good social work practice includes the capability to draw on community development approaches. As a result, the teaching on the social work degree needed to include the required knowledge base linked to community development. Moreover, Barron and Taylor (2010) noted that students would also require an opportunity to develop their skills in community development approaches and identified that practice placements would need to offer students the opportunity to practice and participate in this area.

Some of the challenges linked to this engagement, however, relate to the types of practice placements whereby most students will experience statutory social work and social care services which are delivered by Health and Social Services Trusts that provide both acute and community health and social services (Griffiths, 1974; CDRG, 1991; Taylor, 1998, 1999). Indeed, Barron and Taylor (2010) posit that critics might disagree with teaching community development skills to all students as many will be working within statutory sector settings which may not use community development approaches. However, as the role of the social worker becomes more diverse, teaching community development approaches will be increasingly invaluable in facilitating students to become 'generically competent workers' (Barron and Taylor, 2010: 381). This view is supported by Conlon (2001:2) about the statutory sector definition, which indicates that 'community development is about strengthening and bringing about change in communities. It consists of a set of methods which can broaden vision and a capacity for social change, and approaches, including consultancy, advocacy, and relationships with local groups'.

Das et al. (2016), drawing on recent studies (Filliponi, 2011; Mendes, 2009; Routledge, 2006), support the view that the teaching content in the social work degree should integrate community development theory and methods more robustly and practice learning opportunities should provide students with further opportunities for developing their knowledge base and skills concerning community development.

Today, community development in NI is a central component of a student's practice placement, whereby students must evidence how they have met the community development component. The guidelines concerning this state that community development approaches should be an integral part of all social work practice and not an add-on (NIDSWP, 2021). In meeting this requirement, students must demonstrate an understanding of the key characteristics and practices of community development

approaches (Ibid). Despite this focus on community development on practice placements, students on undergraduate degree courses across all the social work programmes in NI are offered limited teaching on community development, yet community development is a crosscutting theme that should be underpinning teaching in a much more robust way, as identified by both Barron and Taylor (2010) and Das et al., (2016). This is not just an issue in NI, Mendes (2009:243), in his critique of community development education in social work teaching in Australia, highlights that 'professional social work education and discourse seems to relegate community development to the margins.' To address this, Mendes analyses the impact of community development teaching over a 10-year period on a social work course in Australia, where community development is taught as a final-year undergraduate module over 12 weeks. Mendes (2009) concludes that this community development teaching has introduced social work students to the effectiveness of using community development skills and processes, and students have noted that their practice outcomes are notably enhanced because of this curriculum. It is clear from this analysis that social work education globally could benefit from a more robust community development curriculum.

Social work students are taught to conceptualise social problems, and their solutions on a continuum from 'micro' practice with individuals to 'mezzo' practice with families and groups to 'macro' practice, which interacts with institutions, communities, and society at large, the micro model dominates due to students' desires to help, reinforced by the opinions of tutors and staff on placement (Tan, 2009). Community social work, as evidenced above, continues to be relegated to brief mentions in policy and practice courses.

Jacobson (2001:52 cited in Tan 2009) states that 'social work's emphasis on therapy has become so substantial that many of the activities long associated with the profession (such as system reform work, community organizing, advocacy, social activism, community economic development, and human capital development) are no longer called 'social work'.'

Tan (2009) contends that an emphasis on macro-level change in communities and societies becomes important for two reasons. First, believing in the importance of community-level change creates the opportunity to believe in the power of solidarity in oppressed populations. Secondly, recognition that the problems people face are social, not individual. If the problem is ultimately one of injustice, then the solution is participatory change and revolution, not individual therapy, or charity.

It is clear, then, that social work training globally should provide a more explicit focus on the practice and theory of community development to enable students to develop a deeper understanding of the application of theory to practice. Mendes (2009), in his critique of social work education in Australia, identified that there needs to be greater integration between community development and social work theory and practice. Both Mendes (2009) and Heenan (2004) suggest that any skills-based modules in social work education should include examples of community development interventions so that students learn to focus their interventions on both the individual and social context.

The following section will consider some of the findings from the mentimeter survey that sought to capture information on how students meet their community development requirements.

Mentimeter results with practice teachers in NI

Seeking permission from the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP), a mentimeter survey was developed to seek information on how practice teachers meet the community development requirements for social work students on practice placements. The mentimeter survey was disseminated by practice learning coordinators for each of the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts and the voluntary sector to 321 practice teachers. The response rate to the mentimeter survey was 33% (n=106) which is deemed to be an average survey response rate (Lindemann, 2021).

The mentimeter results identified that 78% of practice teachers said that students would develop a leaflet for service users/ carers to meet their community development requirements. A further 74% said they would co-produce a leaflet with service users/ carers/ communities, which is more what a community development approach would recommend. However, the fact remains that there is far too great a reliance on this method to meet community development requirements, regardless of whether it is 'with' or 'for' service users/ carers/ communities. This finding supported the ancedotal feedback from social work students and practice teachers about the use of leaflet-making in meeting the community development component of the practice placement.

What stood out from the findings of the survey, however, were individual examples of excellent pieces of community development work that students

were undertaking in partnership with service users/carers and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example:

- Delivering parcels to foodbanks with recipe cards
- Developing a 'young refugee' information guide for potential foster carers
- Developing new community sports opportunities for newly arrived children from other countries
- Bringing music lessons to communities who cannot afford them.
- Partnership working with an organisation working to support mothers whose children have been removed from their care.
- Evaluating support services i.e., 'Good Morning Service' for older people
- Working in partnership with community groups to encourage men with mental health issues to participate in sports.

What is striking from the examples above is how an intersectional lens has been applied to the pieces of community development work and the examples demonstrate how people's combination of identities matter when developing and co-producing services. As a concept, intersectionality is a powerful tool in helping social workers understand how varying types of discrimination can impact on an individual (Birbeck and Houston, 2021; Crenshaw, 1989). Further undergraduate examples of community development are showcased in the NIDSWP (2022) annual review of practice learning which contained details of community development work on practice placement and the hugely beneficial impact of these for service users/ carers/ communities (i.e., community development approaches were taken to the development of new contact rooms and the development of a young refugee's appeal for foster carers). The examples highlighted above, alongside the postgraduate best practice examples on the NISCC (2022) website following community development training, are evidence of the impact that the community development component of social work training can have on individuals and communities. These examples serve to highlight the observation made by Truell and Compton (2020) that the pandemic has reignited the importance of community development for social work practice.

The following section will introduce two case studies that draw on COVID-19-inspired community development case studies, taking examples from practice, including work carried out online, and the role, practice, and efficacy of virtual community development during a time of physical distancing.

Case study one:
Community development with the LGBTQ+ community

The problem

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LGBTQ+ sector in NI, alongside all organisations both within the voluntary and community sector as well as the public and private sector, had to close their office doors and either furlough staff or move their work online. Research has long highlighted that many minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ population in the UK, have significantly poorer health and well-being outcomes and worse experiences of using health and care services than others (Fish; 2017; King, 2008; Author, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these inequalities, with some groups experiencing much higher transmission and much higher mortality rates than others (Elgar et al., 2021). This picture reflects wider inequalities in the social determinants of health, for example, in housing, income, and employment (Gemelas and Davidson, 2022; Pearse et al., 2019)). When the first national 'lockdown' arrived in March 2020, for LGBTQ+ charities, the option to stand down teams and services were not considered. Instead, the organisations committed to finding new ways of remaining available and responsive to their clients and service users. This meant rapidly pivoting their entire delivery models away from venue-based, individual, and group work activities to online platforms to meet both the existing and new needs of the community. This meant turning crisis into innovation, finding new ways of working, and embracing improvisation and learning.

Key or major challenges

Some of the key challenges that the organisation faced included the issue of 'at home' IT infrastructure; finding online platforms that would be inclusive; engagement from clients and service users who were not IT savvy or who may not have had access to relevant technology; event organising; funding etc.

Solutions to the key challenges

Cost saving activities were undertaken in consultation with funders, to determine where money could be saved (i.e., in terms of in office heating/electric and travel expenses) and where money could be spent (i.e.,

enhancing internet speeds for staff working from home and provision of a laptop or tablet that would allow for online working and buying licences for online platforms such as Zoom). Funding applications were sought out and referral forms (to other charities and schemes) completed to help resource clients and service users who were most in need, with some means of communication, e.g., a mobile phone, a tablet, or laptop. The staff team came together to action plan events and engagement sessions, manage how to continue with therapeutic one-to-one sessions, help those in crisis, and so on.

How solutions were implemented

The LGBTQ+ sector organisations spent time setting up social network opportunities and assisting many people who weren't confident using online platforms to become more technically aware. Groups were set up on social media platforms to help clients and service users engage with one another; online video conferencing groups such as coffee mornings, film nights, games nights, cookery demonstrations, guitar lessons, art classes, aerobics and yoga classes were set up and facilitated over Zoom. For children and young people, age-appropriate activities including online rhyme time, story time, activity sessions with arts and crafts or plant growing packs sent out in advance etc. Crisis and therapeutic work continued with clients who needed it, using an online video conferencing platform such as Zoom.

Benefit/impact:

The impact of this work:

- Increased social connectedness.
- Reduced isolation and loneliness
- Increased life-satisfaction
- Shared feelings of positivity, relatedness, caring for others benefited people's mental health.
- Increased people's social networks
- Using online groups as a way to express emotions improved the frequency of using negative coping mechanisms such as drugs and alcohol.

Case study two

The problem

Practitioners noticed an increasing frustration among service users who have transferred to the Looked After Children's Team (LAC). This frustration was with the lack of information they have about a LAC team, the lack of information as to why the young person is transferring to the team, the lack of information and explanation as to what the LAC service is, what they do, who they support and how they support. This frustration was often reflected in anger, anxiety, worry and misconceptions. This is a very difficult starting point for young people and indeed the social workers in the LAC service in building any relationship with young people as foundations for moving forward.

This can often translate throughout the young person and parents' journey through the looked after experience and can have negative consequences in moving plans forward in any meaningful way. It can be a significant barrier to affecting change for the young person and adult often leading to more negative outcome than hoped for. Many parents can remain in a negative cycle and problems continue to repeat themselves and potentially more of their children become looked after as limited change is affected.

There is little literature available for parents and young people about the role of the LAC Team. When the transition to LAC is spoken about to young people and their families, there is immediately confusion as to why this might be, fears that a child may never be returning into parental care, fear from a child that they might never be going home or see their parents again. This fear can be compounded by the allocation of a new social worker, often in a new building, and a whole new team of people to engage with who they often fear do not know their story.

Key or major challenges

The limited information that there is, is often written by professionals and as such the language can be quite stale and somewhat intimidating for young people and parents. It often doesn't truly reflect the role of LAC and most certainly doesn't reflect the experiences of the young people who are looked after and the support that they have received.

With an increasing number of young people becoming looked after, it is important that the correct information about supports, services and roles are available.

Solutions to the key challenges

The change in how young people and indeed adults receive their information via vlogs, social media and bitesize reviews (particularly in the wake of COVID-19), should be reflected in how we share information and how we can reach out to our young people and parents.

There is also an increasing understanding of how young people receive their information with the rise of 'youtubers' who are more often than not peers who the young people 'follow' and feel connected to. This is certainly no different to looked after children and it is often more important that such significant events in a young person's life should have information shared by their peers who have experienced what they have and to be understood through the eyes and ears of another looked after child.

The most important part of the role within the LAC team (or any social work discipline), is building relationships and this can start with the very first contact that social workers have with the young people and parents (if not before). The importance of understanding the social work role can be the building blocks of the relationship and can eradicate many of the misconceptions that parents and young people have.

How solutions were implemented

The core value of the project was based in co-production and service user involvement. Information created by the service user for the service user is often the most accepted and understood way of helping others understand as it reflects the service users own experiences of the service, the team, and what can and perhaps cannot be achieved. The aim was that the service users would be involved from the initial discussions about their experiences of the service, through to script writing/storyboarding, video and production, editing, and finally, the premiere of the video (See APLR – Embracing Practice Learning in the Virtual World: NIDSWP, 2021).

Benefit/impact

- The created videos will be shared with young people and parents of looked-after children, prior to the young person transitioning to the LAC service from the Trust Family Intervention Services when rehabilitation at a LAC review has been ruled out. Young people hearing other children's experiences and expectations of the service will assist them in engaging in the process and knowing what they should expect.
- The videos will be used as part of any induction program for new workers (or indeed existing workers) in the Trust. It will afford them

the opportunity to hear in the words of young people in the service, what young people expect from their social worker, what is important to them in the service and how they can rise to meet these expectations.

• Furthermore, universities and colleges will use the videos as part of the education of social work students. Understanding the service from the service users' own view, in their own words, and from their own experience can be a very informative and powerful teaching tool.

The case studies identify how an intersectional lens was applied by practitioners when developing the various interventions used to support people and communities through the pandemic. The LGBTQ+ case study demonstrates the intersections of LGBTQ+ identity and age/gender/socioeconomic factors etc. and the actions practitioners could take to challenge the impact of disadvantage on individuals, families and communities. The case study linked to looked after children demonstrates how practitioners and young people worked collaboratively, drawing on young people's experiences to understand the impact of coming into care and becoming a 'looked after child'. Birbeck and Houston (2021) using the work of Van Impe and Arteel (2018) posit that intersectionality is an effective framework for social workers in so far as it promotes a greater understanding of how privilege and power can impact on a service user while also acknowledging the wider systems at play.

Analysis and discussion

COVID-19 has woken the social work profession up to the importance of re-engaging with communities (Truell and Crompton, 2020). The response to COVID-19 has demonstrated the contribution that communities and community organisations make to public health. Community life is essential for health and wellbeing, and we are all more aware of the value of social connections, neighbourliness, a sense of belonging, control, and mutual trust. The voluntary and community sector has always been a key player in the public health system, and this became even more evident during the initial COVID-19 crisis. The community and voluntary sectors are often closer to and better at connecting with marginalised groups than other sectors (including health and social care/work). As such, they are ideally placed to implement more community-centred approaches. Their

role in reducing health inequalities is essential. Understanding community needs and strengths and building local action are part of the public health response and can help build resilience. Research (Stansfield et al., 2020:12) has demonstrated that it is essential to facilitate the conditions for communities to thrive. This includes:

- the role of community development, especially in marginalised communities, in order to increase people's control over their health and wellbeing.
- having a strong and co-ordinated voluntary and community sector, reaching out to those in need through responsive and innovative ways.
- ensuring basic needs are met through employment, housing, food, income, natural environment and education, as prerequisites for community engagement and action (See BASW Cost of Living Survey, 2022).
- maintaining two-way communication and decision-making between communities and organisations, to ensure needs and priorities are understood and addressed.
- skilling the workforce in working with communities, using strengths-based approaches and coproduction.
- utilising community-centred approaches to provide support and services, alongside professional-led services.

Tan (2009) believes community development is the most practical framework for social workers seeking lasting change for individuals and the communities and societies in which they live. It focuses on the centrality of oppressed people in the process of overcoming externally imposed social problems. A community development framework places the social worker firmly in the role of facilitator, not an expert.

Indeed, community social work as an ethos needs to be considered as a different way of working. Community social work empowers local people to use existing resources to change and improve their communities. It is working 'with' not 'for' the community, an approach that underpins social work, informing policy and practice. Turbett (2020) captures the essence of community social work in today's climate with a critique of the role of today's social workers being reduced to assessment and care plans, community social work remaining marginalised, and social work constantly reacting to crises and working in silos. Turbett (2020) posits that community social work should not be regarded as a peripheral activity

but as a function of, and located within, mainstream frontline social work teams.

Lynch et al. (2021:2) argue that now is the time for innovation and development of our teaching practices so that we, as educators, can inspire the next generation of social work practitioners to be adaptable to changing situations and to be 'critical thinkers, capable of practical action in disrupted times.' They posit (ibid) that basing social work teaching on the principles of community development, human rights, and social justice will develop innovative practitioners who can respond quickly to community and societal issues. These practices became apparent during COVID-19, with the evidence suggesting that social workers across the globe developed support systems and networks for communities in crisis, helping to return social work practice back to its community-based roots' (Lynch et al., 2021:6; Truell, 2020).

Key learning and recommendations

- Social work degree programme providers must deliver a clearer focus on the practice and theory of community development to enable students to develop a deeper understanding of the application of theory to practice.
- Students need to be encouraged to make the connections between how community development approaches, theories, models, and methods relate to other parts of the course and not to be viewed in isolation.
- In training for practice evidence requirements, more time is required to enable students to translate evidence requirements (predominantly written by caseworkers for caseworkers) into a meaningful community development context.
- Training on the skill of facilitation and group work in social work degree programme providers is key to successful community development.
- With the employment of social workers with dedicated community development time in NI primary care teams following Delivering Together (DOH, 2017), there is scope for the development of dedicated community social work placements, or at minimum, meaningful community development opportunities, but this would need to be considered alongside the capacity for on-site facilitators and practice teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have put forward the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to re-explore community development in the context of social work The pandemic has generated the potential for much greater community engagement. Given this opportunity to move social work away from paperwork to people work, we have highlighted the importance of taking an intersectional lens to our work which can promote a more thorough understanding of how interconnecting social identities and oppressions manifest in the everyday experiences of the people and communities we support (Nayak and Robbins, 2018). We have drawn on the academic literature to address the historical tensions and current connections between community development and social work. We have used NI as a case study to consider the benefits and limitations of social work and community development teaching and learning in the social work degree programme. We have drawn on international examples (Mendes, 2009), reflecting on how community development can be taught as a complete academic module to undergraduate students and noted the benefits of this for both social work students and the individuals and communities with whom they are engaging. We have concluded that social work teaching and learning globally need to strengthen student understanding of community development beyond leaflet production to a coherent set of knowledge, skills, and values. Despite the minimal teaching about community development in social work in NI, this article contains thought-provoking and valuable examples of community development in practice through case studies and the mentimeter examples that could be used to inspire community development practices in social work education in other parts of the world.

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