Reflection and evaluation from an agency and student perspective: Based on a consumer evaluation of Tautoko Services

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Melissa has a wide range of interests within the field of social work. These include adoption, intellectual disability and working alongside young people and their families. Melissa is currently working in a social work position in a Victoria University Hall of Residence supporting first year students. This position was initially a pilot position but has since been made permanent due to the need for the service. Melissa has a special interest in applied strengths based practice which is consistent with the approach of the following research. The research piece was completed on behalf of Tautoko Services, a community support service for individuals and families who experience the challenges of intellectual disability.

Introduction and rationale

Tautoko Services are coming up to their 10th anniversary of operation in August 2006. As part of their strategic plan, they decided to review the effectiveness of their service from the perspective of the service users, who are people, predominantly children, with intellectual disability and whose behaviour is challenging for their family or whanau.

Tautoko Services decided to invite an independent researcher to carry out this research to elicit honest feedback and avoid power inequalities in the interviewing process. They approached Massey University and offered this project as part of a student placement.

I was in my final year of the Master of Social Work (Applied) and agreed to carry out this research as my last fieldwork placement. I had previously completed my own research piece so was aware of the research process, the ethics and implications.

Background literature

Consumer participation is more likely to lead to better informed policies and improved outcomes for individuals and families (White, 2002). Therefore, it was important for the research to involve Tautoko service users to make the outcomes and research recommendations realistic for the people that Tautoko supports. Involving service users also promotes accountability within a service by encouraging commitment to making changes based on their suggestions (White, 2002). Therefore, recommendations were sought from Tautoko service users to yield relevant evaluation and strategies for service improvement.

The degree of contextual fit in the planning and implementation of strategies within Tautoko Services was assessed within the research. Albin et al. (1996) defined contextual

fit as the degree of compatibility between one's environment, lifestyle and the services that are provided for them. According to Albin et al. (1996) variables that need to be taken into consideration, with regard to contextual fit, include: the individual's and their family's culture, ethnicity and values, their support systems, skills and key stakeholders and their day to day living patterns and routines. The plan also needs to be understandable to those who will implement it, address the individual's and their family's highest priorities, use the resources readily available and be realistic to use in the long term

Part of the feedback was used to determine how the service improves the quality of life for service users, and how quality of life could be improved further. The Gentle Teaching Institute (2005) described eight basic values for an individual's quality of life that could be measured and translated into concrete goals for people with intellectual disability. These were: bodily integrity, feeling safe, feeling self worth, having a life structure, a sense of belongingness, social participation, having meaningful daily activities and inner contentment. The interview questions were framed around these areas to assess if they were relevant to the quality of life of Tautoko service users.

Methodology

Nine people were interviewed either by phone or in person. They were either parents of children with intellectual disability or support staff of adults with intellectual disability. The selection process included Tautoko staff putting forward three names of people who had finished working with them in the last year, followed by me choosing a name and contacting the person to seek consent and negotiate an interview time. Written consent was acquired from all participants.

Interviews took the form of a conversation and followed an interview guide with themes to be covered. The design of the methodology abided by the ANZASW code of ethics and the Massey University guidelines for research placements.

Summary of results

The data from the interviews revealed many positive processes within Tautoko Services. The agency was perceived to be approachable and accessible and the staff communicated and established rapport well. Participants felt their family values, culture and beliefs were taken into consideration by Tautoko and they had input into the design and implementation of behavioural strategies. There were significant changes to people's quality of life after working with Tautoko Services.

The feedback from the participants illustrated a need for some standardisation in some process areas to ensure consistency between staff and monitor contextual fit. The initial meeting and monitoring of strategies were areas that participants suggested could be improved.

Recommendations

Recommendations within the research were made in light of emergent themes from the feedback and direct suggestions from participants. These included:

- Clear and consistent communication of staff at referral to ensure that people have realistic expectations about the process of Tautoko.

- Advocacy to the Ministry of Health for increased funding for employment of more staff to decrease the waitlist times.

- A visual representation of contextual preferences and quality of life baselines for each individual and family could be documented by staff at the beginning of assessment to aid reflection in the monitoring phase.

- Continual consultation with people around how visits are spent and the contextual appropriateness of strategies.

- More thorough and interactive monitoring to check contextual fit and increase consistency.

- Motivation for continual use and more satisfactory sign off by ensuring that people have confidence in using and generalising strategies on their own.

- Develop tools to assess contextual fit and quality of life outcomes to increase accountability in staff and make strengths explicit.

Fieldwork placement experience

This fieldwork placement was a great experience which solidified my learning at the end of the Master of Social Work (Applied) degree. Partaking in this particular research project provided me with a unique opportunity to look at the overall picture of Tautoko Services without getting submerged in the detail, which is my experience of previous fieldwork placement. It would be useful for more agencies to utilise research based fieldwork opportunities for students who are at the end of their studies and have an interest in research and evaluation.

The nature of the research allowed me to ask service users what they thought of the support they received. I think this is sometimes lost in social work practice, when there is too much focus on the process of work. This experience allowed me to better understand the concept of reflective practice and develop these skills. Carrying out a placement in an agency that had a similar philosophy that I adopt in social work practice allowed me to evaluate how the agency adhered to the principles of their philosophy and also analyse how I do this on a personal basis.

The research placement enabled me to link with every level of Tautoko Services. I met with the board initially, had discussions with the director about agency requirements, had interactive discussions with Tautoko staff and gathered feedback from the service users. I could engage with all staff to get a wide understanding of the agency and the underlying philosophy that it encompasses.

The theoretical knowledge gained from my degree informed the research process that I undertook. I was able to develop my analytical skills and extend my conceptual knowledge of strengths based theory and the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. The experience, therefore, enabled me to put theory into practice more efficiently than I would have done in a non-research placement due to the level of analysis needed in the project.

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