

# A strengths approach to building futures: UK students and refugees together

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on the development of mutually beneficial relationships between refugees and students. A deficit model constructs refugees as a *burden* on the host community rather than an *asset*. Services provided to refugee communities often reflect this view and ignore the substantial *resources* within them. A case study of work between students and refugees which builds on the strengths of refugee communities demonstrated significant gains for both students and refugees. Key theoretical concepts in exploring this approach are those of *risk*, *status* and *continuity*.

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on the development of mutually beneficial relationships between refugees and students. A deficit model constructs refugees as a burden on the host community (Boswell, 2003) rather than a potentially valuable asset (Cunliffe, 1997; Duvell and Jordan, 2002). Services provided within this deficit discourse typically maintain those relationships even though research may demonstrate substantial resources in the refugee 'community'<sup>1</sup> (Rousseau and Drapeau, 2003). In the UK, disaggregation of services alongside the proliferation of funding initiatives places organizations in the position of competing for scarce resources and defending their service position. We illustrate the opportunities that a strengths approach creates for a needs-led, integrated and mutually beneficial collaboration offering immediate and long-term gains to both refugee and student communities. The two-and-a-half-year-old project demonstrates how community regeneration can be supported through building new relationships between individuals, communities and the professionals serving them.

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1 The definition of community and how it is used in relation to refugees is explored in a later section of the paper.

Critical reflection on relevant community development, social work and professional education models provides the theoretical framework within which the project's processes and outcomes are considered. We discuss issues of status, continuity and risk and make links to global provision.

## Context

The City of Plymouth in the South West of England has long been a predominantly white area (black and minority ethnic [BME] population 0.6 % – census 2001) where racism and social isolation for BME individuals is severe (Bright, 2003). Prevailing attitudes show a 'colour blind' approach (Jay, 1992; Dhalech, 1999) where students<sup>2</sup> have to work hard to develop anti-racist and culturally sensitive practice (Baldwin, 1996; Butler, Elliott and Stopard, 2003). It has been a dispersal area for years for families and single men seeking asylum. A failure of strategic planning has led to a lack of 'clustering', making it difficult to develop a cultural or ethnic community to support newcomers. Currently, at least twenty-five different first languages are spoken and families' countries of origin are diverse. Boswell's research in Germany and the UK found 'social tension is usually highest in areas with relatively small numbers of people seeking asylum and with little experience of integrating other groups' (2003, p. 324). The small established minority ethnic communities are likely to feel exposed by the visibility and media hostility to the presence of people who are refugees (Collett, 2004) and cultural differences between refugees can lead to suspicion and competition between groups<sup>3</sup> (Goldsworthy, 2002). The refugee 'community' is thus a highly disparate group and one whose needs are unlikely to be met without a high degree of flexibility, creativity and skill.

In relation to refugees, the term 'burden' is used to refer to the financial and social cost of initial reception, accommodation, food, security and 'support' services (Boswell, 2003). Additionally, in the UK, 'burden' is in part a consequence of immigration policy – the denial of the right to work, surveillance, control and inefficient administrative decision-making processes (Humphries, 2004). The 'burden' discourse constructs refugees as passive recipients of welfare rather than acknowledging their resources, resilience and capacity for self-care.

Whilst there is no intention to imply that the experience of refugees can be compared to that of students, it is nonetheless possible to identify a similar

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2 Students referred to throughout this paper are enrolled on Higher Education professional training courses such as Social Work, Occupational Therapy and Health Studies and have to undertake assessed practice as part of their studies.

3 Reference the body of literature that builds on Paulo Freire and Adrienne Rich's work.

discourse within Higher Education courses training social workers and allied professionals. Changes in professional education requirements and shortages in health and social care staff have led to a crisis in finding sufficient placements for students enrolled on courses (CCETSW, 1992; Land, 1994) and the allocation of increased targeted funding (DH, 2003). Students are seen as presenting a further demand on already stretched agency personnel. The 'burden' discourse constructs students as 'needy' and 'time-consuming' rather than acknowledging their potential for positive contributions (Shardlow and Doel, 2002).

The Students and Refugees Together (START) project, as the name implies, constructs both refugees and students as significant social contributors in transition. One characteristic that refugees and students have in common is that they are both groups with substantial resources, identified by their social context. As groups in transition, they bring a high potential for creativity and change through the formation of new alliances. Whilst the contextual needs of both groups are recognized, an emphasis is placed on capacity-building through learning together.

### **The START project: origins and mission**

An unfunded pilot service to refugees has run since September 2001. It originated from the unmet need<sup>4</sup> identified by the specialist teacher supporting refugee children's integration into mainstream schools and the Social Services City Centre referral coordinator. Both workers were concerned about the inability of existing structures to respond to refugees' urgent and complex human needs. In collaboration with the University Placement Coordinator, a structure was put in place which allowed the skills of student volunteers from the 'caring professions' to be used safely to support refugees.

START's mission is 'To work in partnership with families, individuals and organizations to facilitate the transition of refugees from people in need to self-reliant contributors to their local community' (Project constitution). Students offer a holistic, needs-led service to refugee families and unaccompanied young people by:

- making assessment of the complex difficulties experienced by multi-generational families and unaccompanied young people;
- giving information and practical support to help them to access existing services and to integrate into the community;
- identifying barriers in existing agency practice to this group;

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<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Clarke's helpful model demonstrating the 'residual needs gap' left by the organization of targeted services (Clarke, 2000, p. 15).

- addressing those barriers and reporting on the need for policy and procedural change;
- working constructively with other resources in the city and nationally to promote cost-effective and integrated services.

## **Process and outcomes**

Since the project began, twenty social work students have undertaken assessed practice learning by providing the service. A total of twenty-nine refugee families (forty-seven adults and ninety-nine children) have been involved with the service, from at least ten different countries of origin with more than eleven different first languages. Needs worked with included housing and related issues, education and work training, health and specialist therapy, income support, legal issues, immigration, access to leisure and cultural services, combating racial harassment, emotional distress and low self-esteem. Since June 2003 employment of a part-time temporary worker has offered continuity to agencies and service users, significantly increased the number of students and refugees involved with the project and developed the agency profile within the city.

Referrals to the project come from agencies and individuals who identify refugees with unmet needs, not eligible to be met by other agencies. This gap in service may be because needs are not expressed in ways that will enable a response or because they are too complex. Disaggregation of services and an emphasis on measurable outcomes (Clarke, 2000) means that services tend to be highly targeted and inaccessible for people who cannot articulate their needs within the specific service contract framework. The needs worked with by students are identified by refugees themselves through the assessment process and are neither service-led nor criteria-based (Milner and O'Byrne, 2002) since the project has no resources other than student time to allocate. The relationship between students and refugees is one which takes time to develop trust through one-to-one work, carefully negotiated to ensure that service users are feeding back their needs, problems, potential and successes. Students draw on their own experience, creativity and knowledge to help refugees to identify resources and needs and frame them in ways that enable them to access services to which they are entitled, and also to make a contribution to the communities in which they live.

Three different and complementary types of activities are undertaken by students in the project:

- casework with referrals;
- setting up events and activities for social networking;

- working with other agencies to improve collaboration and access for refugees.

The casework service is the core activity and is based on theoretical frameworks that emphasize recognition of structural factors and the connectedness of individual work with political action (Fook, 1993; Ife, 1997; Fook, Ryan and Hawkins, 2000; Humphries, 2004). Students create the conditions for exploring particular needs or obstacles within a context of mutual respect and acknowledged cultural ignorance. Subsequent work is tailored to individual needs and can include substantial amounts of time over a short period to support refugees in meeting their own needs. Students visit people in their own homes to offer practical and emotional support in accessing services and activities and will encourage self-reliance and support to others as illustrated by the following case examples.

*Example 1*

Mrs F, who spoke very little English, had complained consistently of stomach pain to the GP surgery where she was seen as an attention-seeking nuisance. The student's perseverance in advocating for her right to translation provision resulted in an emergency examination and immediate admission to hospital for treatment of a neglected life-threatening infection.

*Example 2*

Students undertook family work to resolve inter-generational violence caused by acute stress and culture change.

Complementary to the casework, events and activities to encourage social networking are an important aspect of the project's work. It is recognized that racism, social isolation and the loss of family and other support networks can seriously impact on the mental health of refugees (Gorst-Unsworth, 1992; Van Willigen, 2000). The project is committed to asset-based community building (Diacon and Guimaraes, 2003) exemplified by the example below.

*Example 3: the 'Cultural Kitchen'*

This is a collaborative venture between the project, a local church and another refugee support organization. Between thirty and sixty refugees cook, eat and socialize each week. Families and individuals are encouraged to take part in all aspects of the activities, improving their language skills, acquiring food hygiene certificates, accessing funded support into employment, getting involved in conservation, an allotment project,

drama and craft as well as having healthy, culturally appropriate food and making friends. Initiated by students in response to the needs of young refugees in emergency accommodation, the 'Kitchen' has evolved according to service user need and now includes families, single men and unaccompanied young people, some of whom are involved in running the service. Activities include craft workshops, drumming, games as well as cooking. Staff and volunteers from many agencies have sought involvement, including environmental, cultural, volunteering, further and higher education as well as specific refugee-focused organizations.

The third aspect of the project's work is directed at other agencies (see examples below). Refugees' inability to understand and respond to letters from statutory agencies often turns a straightforward situation into an involved, complicated one. The pressures on agency staff because of reducing budgets can combine with racism and prejudice to create major obstacles for refugees in their dealings with statutory authorities. Many of the issues dealt with by the project are resolved quickly and efficiently but families received little or no response when they tried to sort out those issues independently.

The 'capacity-building' or 'strengths' approach (Davis, 1994) fosters the potential contribution of all involved and is particularly relevant in working with other agencies which may be suspicious of competition or vulnerable to criticism. Students advocate for individual service users and families in ways that educate and encourage future positive responses to refugees and related agencies. They also use opportunities presented through other work to foster links and trust between agencies in the city and nationally. All activities are directed at encouraging people involved with the service to have confidence in their own abilities and offer each other mutual support.

#### *Example 4*

The project linked up two city coordinators who were developing strategies for 'hard to reach' groups in related areas but ignorant of each other's existence.

#### *Example 5*

Students have worked with a health service provider in the city to improve routine provision of translation services for refugee patients.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

In considering models of community development work with refugees we must be specific about the nature of this 'community'. Accounts of

community development (Clarke, 2000) and community social work (Stepney and Evans, 2000) can be seen to assume citizenship or a right to belong for members of that community. The diversity of the refugee 'community' in terms of age, class, gender, cultural and religious background, first language and legal status indicates the limitation of these models. This is a 'community' whose identity relies on what Fiona Williams calls 'division' (1996). External factors define their status, justifying – through 'difference' – their exclusion from such basic human rights as 'food security', family life and freedom from violence (Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002). Their common identifying features are geographic and cultural dislocation, social exclusion and social isolation. Work to support a group identity of 'diversity' and inclusion (Williams, 1996) must focus simultaneously on different levels. These are: individual work to explore needs and potential, identification of obstacles and the support of self-confidence in overcoming them, opportunities for building social relationships and the capacity to influence policy. As Kenny states, 'community is identified as the site for forming identities and fulfilling social needs' (2002, p. 291).

Providing a social casework service is a demanding, skilled and expensive activity which may be difficult to justify in 'input/outcome' terms where the positive results are measured in 'what did not happen'. Skilled professional time is therefore an expensive 'luxury' for many service users and tends to be spread thinly and targeted. A defining feature of this project is that work is undertaken primarily by students as part of their professional training. They bring to the project their personal resources as well as current knowledge about individual, professional and political issues. Their status also maintains a culture of shared learning and emphasizes the transitional nature of both 'communities'.

Models of practice learning for professionals rely significantly on the apprenticeship model in which an experienced practitioner passes on their skill and knowledge to the student (Rogof, 1990; Whittington, 2004). While there are benefits to this model, students are likely to learn the constraints imposed by employing agencies. In the current climate, they will be limited in their potential through the way that agency structures increasingly curtail the freedom of staff to initiate activities in the workplace (Clarke, 2000, p. 15). The function of social work in the UK has been the focus of substantial debate (Woodcock, 2003) and the adoption by the British Association of Social Workers of the international definition for social work (IFSW, 2001) places an obligation on programmes to offer students more than an apprenticeship into existing agency procedures.

## Discussion

The nature of the START project is not easily defined. Indeed, current work to secure funding for premises, supervisory and administrative staff in order to increase capacity has highlighted this difficulty. Government funding for organizations working with refugees is primarily directed at those who have 'leave to remain', and support for those waiting for a decision (sometimes for years) is being significantly eroded (Cohen, 2004). Whilst much of the casework is with families who have received a positive decision, students are not expected to respond to need on the basis of someone's legal status. Government funding streams are therefore largely inaccessible. The project's structure can be seen as a charitable organization offering service to a 'vulnerable group', or as an educational project that creates student placements or as an example of social entrepreneurship. Each of these options carries both strengths and limitations; Kenny's work (2002) provides a more helpful theoretical framework for exploring the issues.

As an 'activist' organization, the project seeks to provide 'a space for the development of oppositional interpretations of interests and needs, where the voices of those who are excluded from the dominant discourses can be heard' (Kenny, 2002, p. 292). The project's work with individuals and families is directed at providing that space and supporting those voices and so could be defined as a *micro-activist* organization. The constantly changing workforce of students and the absence of a coherent refugee 'community' are protection against the dangers cited of organizational solidarity becoming a dominant agenda. Instead, the transitional nature of both groups allows for the formation of new alliances with high potential for change and creativity. The social work perspectives cited above are some protection against the temptation to adopt the welfare model encouraged by funding bodies, which constructs refugees as a burden and undermines their potential. Aspects of the 'market' model are relevant in that it promotes sustainability and recognizes the long-term capacity for contribution. This is particularly significant for the 'education business' where focus could shift to the project serving students' need for placement learning to ease the burden on the professional community. The integrity of the work relies on the project remaining an 'activist' organization, capable of radical approaches to connect casework with other forms of social action (Goldsworthy, 2002). Unlike established professionals, students are still forming a professional identity and can explore the permeability of professional boundaries with service users, other agencies and forms of intervention. Their work can extend along the community development continuum of empowering casework, community-building and social action.

## Conclusion

Social work is historically and internationally characterized by a capacity to find creative ways of supporting people who are marginalized or dispossessed in claiming their human rights (Stelmaszuk, 1998). The UK settlement movement placed students in communities to their mutual benefit (Gilchrist and Jeffs, 2001). Other examples include a law centre for Roma people set up by social work lecturer Diane Videva with students of the Free University of Bourgas (Videva, 1998); and social work students at the University of Hong Kong working with socially excluded groups in an action research programme developed by Chan ([www.hku.hk/socwork/hksw/staff/cecilia.html](http://www.hku.hk/socwork/hksw/staff/cecilia.html)). In these projects, students are central to the development of new types of practice and can form professional relationships defined not by agency practice but by negotiation with service users. These relationships have the power to transform both by drawing on their resources, fostering creativity and self-confidence. There are also challenges to a model in which there is a lack of continuity for long-term difficulties.

Structures need to be capable of constant self-renewal and to draw on the discourses of strengths approach, capacity-building and collective learning to serve the needs of all involved. An educational context offers strong potential for acknowledging mutual ignorance and learning together, provided the focus remains balanced (Shardlow and Doel, 2002). Concern that the ideal of 'community' may privilege unity over diversity and sympathy over the recognition of the limits of one's understanding is mitigated by a context within which all are learning.

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