Abstract

This paper investigates the nature of students' learning of the Egan Skilled Helper model in enabling them to develop collaborative communication skills which place service-users at the centre of decision making. The paper is a follow-up to an earlier paper which found that the Egan model was helpful to students as a communication and problem management tool and that they had transferred their learning into practice. The current study involves seven students from the first study and examines whether their knowledge and skills from learning the model in year one have been sustained two years later during their third year practice placement. A key finding is that participants were continuing to use most stages of the model (with the exception of challenging skills) with service-users in a variety of settings. Further findings are that the model is still useful in situations where goals are set by social workers rather than by service-users; and that it is the utilisation of role-play when learning the model which most embeds skills. The implications of these findings for skills training are discussed together with suggestions for further focus.

Introduction

This paper investigates the nature of students' learning of the Egan Skilled Helper model in enabling them to develop collaborative communication skills which place service-users at the centre of decision making. The study focuses on obtaining students' views in order to assess the efficacy of the model and it examines whether students have sustained over time their knowledge and skills developed during the first year of their course.

This study relates to social work in England and Wales and takes as starting points the Professional Capabilities Framework (The College of Social Work 2012) requirement that students should be able to build compassionate and effective relationships with people and the Department of Children, Schools and Families' Social Work Taskforce Recommendations (2010, p. 28) that learners can develop a 'mixture of analytical ability and the practical and empathetic skills that they will need as professional social workers'. Trevithick et al. (2004) found that out of 8023 relevant research papers only 16 addressed a theoretical underpinning to communication skills development. No papers commented on students' own experience of using different models or their preferences. The authors found there was little evidence of evaluation of underpinning knowledge being carried out and even less consideration relating to the success of transferring of learning into practice. Dixon (2013) also comments that how social work practitioners utilise their communication skills learning once they are qualified is little understood.

The use of the Egan model in social work training is not new and Koprowska (2003) in her research on how students learn to engage with service-users describes ways of embedding skills from Egan, notably through them reflecting on their participation in role-play. Dixon (2013) followed up Koprowska's students eleven years later to find out whether and how their knowledge had been transferred into practice. Here, participants reported that the solution focused nature of the model was useful and that relevant skills were still being used.

The current study builds on earlier research (Riggall 2011) which explained how the Egan model was taught to a group of first year full-time and employment based social work students. Shortly after learning the model, they took part in a focus group which elicited their views on the usefulness of using the Egan model in social work settings. There were two key findings: that the students found the model useful in placing service-users at the centre of decision making and were able to transfer their skills into practice. The present study engaged seven employment based students from the first study in further interviews, two years later, to investigate whether they continued their transfer of learning and the ways in which this may – or may not – have been maintained. The study enables a detailed examination of the long-term usefulness of the Egan model as a communication and engagement model in social work.

Munro (2011, p. 86) argues that social workers need skills to be able to 'get through the front door' and build a relationship where a parent 'is willing to tell you anything about the child and family' but that many social workers feel ill-equipped to listen actively or challenge effectively. Likewise, Croisdale-Appleby (2014, p.15) states that social work education needs to prepare social workers to be 'able to communicate with the service receiver and decide appropriate courses of action to manage that process'. He also argues social workers need to be able to empower and increase the independence of those who receive services and recommends '… a strong direction of travel in which people who use services are much more involved in planning and designing their care, both for adults and children' (2014, p. 22). Both Munro and Croisdale-Appleby emphasise the importance of social workers developing empathic intervention and challenging skills and encouraging each service-user to plan a more effective future.

A challenge for social work educators is to help students to develop the intervention skills necessary to work in the above manner and sustain them long after the relevant teaching module has ended. The Egan model (Egan 2014) offers a way of working together with identified skills in forming and maintaining relationships, helping service-users to tell their story, challenging when people have blind spots, and focusing on the person's strengths. The model places the service-user at the centre of decision making, encouraging each person to make and take responsibility for their decisions wherever possible. It encourages service-users to choose realistic and workable goals and to identify relevant strategies for achieving and maintaining goals. The students involved in this study learned the Egan model in their first year and were subsequently interviewed during the third year of their course (the degree was four years in duration). The purpose of this study is to find out whether the skills learned were sustained, and if so, did they continue to be useful in engaging with service-users.

Study aims and objectives

The Egan model is a counselling model primarily used by counsellors who work with willing clients and focus on client choice. One area of interest for this study was to find out whether the Egan model can be adapted to social work settings in which managing risk and decision making is a priority and where social workers find it difficult to engage service-users.

A central aim of the study is to explore the ways in which students sustained and applied their year one learning of the Egan Skilled Helper model to working with service-users in their third year, first practice placement.

The objectives of the study are to (1) examine students' use of Egan's model in their first practice placement in placing the service-user at the centre of decision making; (2) identify which parts of the model if any, are useful in engaging service-users; and (3) explore the transferability of learning from the academic environment to different practice settings.

Methodology

Seven Employment-based BSc Social Work students who took part in the first study (Riggall 2011) volunteered to take part in the current study. A focus group interview was conducted within the university with all seven participants together to find out whether the Egan model was useful to them in engaging with service-users. This was an unstructured session where students were invited to talk freely about whether or not they used the model and how useful it was in practice. The following themes emerged from the focus group session. The Egan model was being employed by all of the participants one way or another in their work in a variety of settings. Some sections were not remembered clearly (such as using challenging skills). Some areas were deemed very helpful such as skills which built and sustained relationships and skills which placed service-users at the centre of decision making. Role-play was deemed to be the best method to embed skills and all participants stated that they found it useful to be able to put into practice a way of engaging for which they had gained a practical way of working rather than just a theoretical knowledge. All the participants stated that they would be happy to engage in one-to-one interviews to discuss further their individual experiences. The themes listed above which emerged from the focus group assisted in forming the questions which were used in the individual interviews.

Seven individual interviews were conducted with students at their first placement venue. In each case, the student's placement occurred in their own workplace. Here, specific data was gathered about the usefulness or otherwise of the model and any transfer of knowledge from the classroom to practice contexts. Each session was recorded, transcribed and analysed. Interviews were conducted either by the author or one other colleague, both of whom were known to the students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the following questions:

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How valuable do you think the Egan model is to you in your engagement with service-users?

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If you do use the model, which parts are most useful to you?

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How helpful is the model to you in placing service-users as much as possible at the centre of decision making?

-

During the module, which learning methods in particular helped you to develop your skills?

Participants were asked to illustrate their answers with examples from their practice.

Individual interviews enabled the participants to talk in depth and more freely about actual case histories and to discuss their own approach in using the model. An oral method of data collection was chosen to enable a more detailed and dynamic response. All of the participants in this study had been involved in the original 2011 study and were keen to be interviewed. However, one person subsequently was unable to take part because of personal circumstances.

The project was approved by the Ethics Committee at the University workplace of the author. No information has been used which could identify either the participants or the service-users with whom they worked.

Findings

The findings listed and discussed henceforth were reported comments from the individual interviews conducted with the seven participants.

Building a relationship with the service-user

Munro (2011) emphasises the crucial role of building effective relationships with service-users. All social work communication skills text books focus on the importance of this, however few explore in depth how students can actually use these skills. All of the students in the study talked about how they saw building relationships with service-users as fundamental to achieving outcomes in their practice and they reported that one of the strengths of the Egan Model is that it offers tools on how to build a relationship. All of the students commented on how useful this was to them and also how the model helped them to support service-users taking control of their own lives:

Egan is all about relationships … of all the theories Egan makes most sense to me. Egan is so positive and solution focused and puts people in charge. Having that approach looking at positives and valuing people, people will be more able after the interaction to do something about it. (Participant 1)

We don't listen to their stories as much and I have found since (learning the model) that when I have listened to their stories it has helped me to build relationships with them, with families, to just be showing that you are listening. (Participant 2)

Participants commented on the importance of helping service-users to identify what was going on in their lives and how skills needed to form working relationships learned from the Egan model enabled them to do this. Roscoe et al. (2011) argue that engaging in a narrative where social workers and service-users can learn from each other and deconstruct and re-author cognitive processes helps service-users to better manage their difficulties. The Egan model offers a similar way of working and the students said they felt more confident from having skills which they could draw on when needed:

In order to start to problem solve with people you have got to get to grips with what they believe is going on for them in that moment. And I suppose from a selfish point of view it is nice to know you have got those means to build a relationship, because going into working with a different service-user group there is that anxiety of 'can I actually do this?' I like the idea I have got this kind of tool to use. (Participant 3)

Assessment skills was another area where the skills learned from the model enable students to get to know service-users and to put them at their ease making it easier to make an accurate assessment:

I do find it useful to build up a comfortable relationship with somebody, yes. It is really important. In order to get a true picture you need that person to feel relaxed and comfortable because quite often it is sensitive subjects that people are talking about – even down to toileting habits and things like that. (Participant 4)

Social workers at times need to take direct action or make decisions for and about service-users. Smith et al. (2012, p. 1469) found in their research on how to work with involuntary service-users that 'Building trust was repeatedly identified as essential for overcoming client's fears to enable engagement to take place'. They also found that any participatory practice could only take place in a climate of a trusting, supporting and communicative relationship. Egan writes at length about working with people who are involuntary, reluctant and resistant and offers skills and guidance for engaging in these circumstances (Egan 2014). Participants gave clear examples of how they had helped such service-users to stay in charge of their own lives as much as possible, even in very challenging situations:

This young woman accepted a voluntary admission to hospital in relation to her mental health and I just don't think that that would have happened if I had been kind of not as conscious of using that model – I don't think we would have had that kind of connection … being aware of where I was sitting, the eye contact – it conveyed – it gave it more meaning. I think she knew I couldn't guarantee her the outcome she wanted – I had been really clear. The last thing that I wanted to do was to impose anything on her. I knew what I felt in terms of her safety would be best but I also knew that for it to have half a chance of working it needed to come from her. (Participant 3)

This student demonstrates that the model has helped her to develop skills of really listening to the service-user without judging or telling them what to do and that this builds the relationship to a point where the person can remain calmer and as much as possible in charge of their own life, even in a crisis situation.

Using listening skills and empathic responding

Recent studies assessing essential skills focus on social workers being able to use active listening skills (Barnes 2002, Richards et al. 2005, Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF] 2010, Munro 2011). Being able to listen and demonstrate listening is a key component of the Egan model throughout every stage. All the students talked about how the model had helped them to use these skills to a greater or lesser degree. The following student manages a day centre for homeless people:

One of the big things in here is listening to people I suppose, they come in with all sorts of issues which need sorting. But I think they just come in sometimes to be listened to. And I noticed, myself included, that people didn't really listen, we sort of thought what would be best for them really, and I think that is in many agencies. (Participant 6)

In classes, students are often heard to be saying that listening is something which comes naturally to them. However, active listening where the helper tries to understand and reflect back to the service-user the meaning of what they are saying is rare (Egan 2014). A strength of the Egan model is that it

teaches students how to do this. A challenge for educators is to teach students the 'how' of listening and to understand the difference between parroting and empathic responding. The model differentiates between these two very different concepts. Participants were able to give examples of how they had learned and could listen with empathic understanding:

I hope it conveyed that I was present with her – fully present with her. Because you can listen and repeat what somebody says but it takes understanding what they are saying to find the equivalent emotion. I think showing that you are there thinking about it shows that you are invested in them. You know, that we are trying, and that they are important. It was clear in this instance that it was the paraphrasing that I think helped to build the relationship and convey that understanding. (Participant 3)

I will use the phrases 'what I am hearing' and 'what you are telling me' 'is what you are telling me …?' 'From what I hear' … and 'this is how I am seeing it' – not my opinion but my interpretation on what they are telling me. So I might say 'so this is how I see what you are telling me. Correct me if I am wrong because I might be totally wrong but this is how I see things'. (Participant 7)

Learning the Egan model ensures social workers do not put words into service users' mouths but instead make sure there is a full understanding of what the person has said. The following participant, who works with children and families, was able to recognise this difference and to reflect on her skills:

It feels like a really powerful thing to say to somebody – 'so you are feeling …' I recognise that you are doing it to convey understanding, to convey recognition and also to reframe for them what is going on but sometimes it can feel like you're defining someone's feelings for them because they might have expressed it and used words and you are using slightly different words, even though they might have a similar meaning.

With this particular girl she was so timid it kind of made me hyper aware of not wanting to be overbearing or thinking 'I know what is going on here' – and to try and build that relationship based on her understanding of what was going on but in this instance and using the paraphrasing and summarising it kind of tipped it on its head because just seeing the change in her – she was a bit incredulous really saying 'yeah, that's just what it feels like' and then all of a sudden you just relax a bit and you're like, 'it's working.' It was a real relief and a confidence boost to see her respond so positively to it and obviously it dispelled those fears I had that I was undermining her or kind of defining her experiences for her. (Participant 3)

The same participant describes how using the Egan model has helped her to assist another service-user to express her deepest feelings without judgement:

And I think that was what in that particular instance with the young woman who went into hospital, it was about the way that she was feeling and, you know, letting her say 'I want to die' in this instance and not imposing my view on that and not taking that away from her really. (Participant 3)

Students do struggle with being empathic when they feel strongly about what the service-user has done. The following participant works in child protection:

I find it hard to say to people 'I understand' because sometimes I just don't understand people. And so I have ended up acknowledging 'I can see this situation makes you really angry' without making any judgement on whether that is right or wrong. Because sometime I think 'you have no right to be angry, you have done this, this and this'. And again it is having a framework to fall back on. Whether or not you agree with a person's position you can still feel and understand how difficult or frustrating the situation they are now in is for them. (Participant 1)

Students need to be helped to recognise and reflect back service-users' feelings and views without necessarily agreeing with their point of view and the model helps students to find their way through this minefield.

Using Egan as a structure and placing service-users at the centre of decision making

Gallagher et al. (2012) in their literature review of research on decision making with children and families found that while social workers view good listening skills as consisting of respect and empathy, what children actually valued was being listened to as a precursor to action being taken by the practitioner which embraced the child's own self-determination and empowerment. While the Egan model embraces active listening skills, Egan (2014) also states that listening is not enough on its own to evoke change and that there should be a movement to action throughout. A key feature of the Egan model is the focus on placing the service-user at the centre of decision making and keeping this control with them. Nearly all the students spoke of how this collaborative way of working had become embedded in their practice:

Of all the models we looked at, Egan made most sense – in supporting that service user to reach their potential and to be successful in solving their problems. (Participant 4)

I've got my favourite bits of Egan: the body language, helping people to sort of identify what they want to achieve. And I'm using it with task centred practice as well. 'We're here at the moment, and where do you want to get to … and how are we going to do it'. (Participant 5)

A key issue is balancing the service-user's needs with the availability of services. The following participant works with older adults:

You tend to bombard them with so much information 'and these are the services you can have …' So I think from the outset I say 'we will try and achieve these things but we have to be really honest that we can't offer you a wish list'. Something I use is asking someone what they feel they need to make things as they want them to be which is obviously what the model says. But sometimes I feel that is taking away some people's control because we are asking them what they want and we are almost telling them how they are going to achieve that because the way they want to achieve it might not be what we can offer. (Participant 5)

The model begins by finding out what the service-user needs but progresses quickly to finding out how realistic and achievable that might be for the person. More work in the training sessions may help students to feel more confident with balancing desires with provision available.

A recent development in some Local Authorities is the use of Edwards and Turnell's (1999) Signs of Safety model (also cited in Bunn 2013). This model encourages building a positive working relationship with the service-user, focusing on strengths and helping people to find their own

solutions to difficulties. This model fits in well with principles from the Egan model and the following student, who works in child protection, describes how she combines the two approaches:

In line with the Signs of Safety approach, it is getting people to come up with their own solutions – for all sorts of reasons they work better if people have chosen them for themselves. When I am working it is about thinking about some of the bits of Egan like Forcefield Analysis – thinking they might want the same goal as us but looking at the things that are likely to stop them and how are they going to get there as well.

It is important not to go in saying 'this needs to happen'. We end up having this bottom line thing – I don't know, Fred can't spend any time with so and so and you then hand it back and say 'how are you going to do that?' so people can come up with all their own solutions and probably some of them could be absolutely bizarre and then you can narrow down which ones you think will work. I suppose it is like Egan – you know, of saying 'how can it happen – you choose'. I suppose there is always risk involved in safeguarding, so there is a limit. I probably learnt about it first from Egan. But I think the way I use Egan, is to remember if we have a set 'this is what needs to happen', it is very easy to drift back into saying 'and this is what you need to do'. (Participant 1)

The major point here is a focus on how the service-user might find and achieve solutions which is a key component of the Egan model and students' understanding of the model helps them to avoid being dictatorial with the service-user. The same participant comments on keeping as much control as possible with the service-user:

Egan doesn't lead and direct and it is not in the interests of the children to do that. You have got something you can work with that gives you a way of doing without influencing what they say. (Participant 1)

The following participants also demonstrate how using the Egan model has helped them to place service-users at the forefront of decision making:

The service-user had had her son removed, she had been abandoned by her family, and now she was potentially losing control. I think I felt quite strongly that it was important to take that time with her. I suppose it is about informed decision making isn't it – as opposed to 'let's bring you round to my way of thinking', to really pull at what she wanted, to really unpick it and be prepared to sit with whatever came out of that and to deal with it - of her having more ownership of what was going on around her. Because I wasn't trying to say 'I have got the answers', I was trying to say 'let's try and understand this better together, let's focus on different things you have said and really think about what is going on. (Participant 3)

It works better if they have come up with the ideas and strategies with you rather than you saying 'you need to do this by this point'. The more they have an input into it the more likely they are to actually fulfil the goal. (Participant 2)

The more we went through it the more he came up with the strategies with me - he sat down and looked at them and was more keen to compromise than he was at the beginning. Then we keep reviewing how it is working for everyone including the young person. It just seemed to be working better when the goals came from him. (Participant 2)

In child protection social work, managing risk is of course a priority and the temptation to take charge can feel overwhelming. The participants above demonstrate that using principles from Egan in encouraging service-users to take as much control as possible in terms of developing their own goals and strategies means that key goals and outcomes are more likely to be achieved.

Use of role-play in developing skills

Students were asked what had helped them to learn the Egan model during the teaching module. Aper et al. (2012) found that simulations (role-plays) encourage confidence in development of skills because they take place in a positive atmosphere and include constructive feedback from participants and observers. A key theme reported by students from the Egan project was that engaging in role-play improved their skills:

When we are more interactive (in class) I remember it more than just listening. If we are more active it sticks in my mind a lot better. (Participant 2)

Throughout the model the role-playing was how I learned. It really did work for me, it just brought it to life. This is how it is going to be when we are out there working with clients. (Participant 5)

It was really nerve-racking and at the time I remember feeling so uncomfortable practising these techniques that I didn't know with this group of people (in class). But, looking back, I don't think you would have grasped that understanding without it being done this way. (Participant 3)

The students have reported that role-play practice clearly embeds their communication skills in a way that alternative learning methods do not. Role-play exercises in the classroom are not always a popular learning method. Dixon (2013) found that students reported that they felt self conscious when engaging in Egan role-plays but afterwards experienced a sense of achievement. Hearing the participants' comments on the usefulness of role-play to their practice is encouraging in planning ways of embedding theory and skills.

Discussion and conclusion

All of the students demonstrated they had absorbed into their practice Egan's way of working which placed service-users as much in control of their own lives as possible, often in very challenging situations and this reflects Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) comments on the need to empower service-users. It is clear that learning the Egan model helped this group of students to keep autonomy with service-users. One participant worked with a service-user who was in crisis and wanting to take her own life. By using advanced empathy she enabled the service-user to express her fears and feelings and thus to remain sufficiently in control to make the decision to go into hospital herself rather than have the decision imposed upon her. It is clear that learning the Egan model and practising these skills have had a major impact on these students' engagement skills.

The parts of the model most frequently used were stage one skills of active listening and empathic responding, stage two skills of placing service-users as much as possible in control of their lives and stages two and three skills of helping people to devise and work on goals and strategies. Learning the Egan model helped all of the participants to use empathic responding in a wide variety of situations to engage and better understand service-users. One participant demonstrated that she used empathic responses to better understand service-users who engaged in activities which she

found abhorrent and how she had learned that being empathic did not mean she had to agree with the person or share the same view. A deep level of understanding of the Egan model was demonstrated in these statements and reflects Munro's (2011) guidance for social workers to develop advanced empathic responding skills.

A key feature of Egan's model is using skills to challenge service-users. Participants clearly found this element more difficult to remember and to use. The requirement to challenge appropriately is highlighted by Munro (2011), the DCSF (2010) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014). A further study is planned to find out why this particular aspect of the Egan model has been so difficult to engage with.

The results demonstrate how the Egan model, a model primarily used with willing clients who set their own goals, can be just as usefully used in situations where goals are set by Children's Services rather than by service-users. One student, working in child protection, demonstrated how she encouraged service-users to be as autonomous as possible in situations where their goals were prescribed by Children's Services, by saying to a parent X is not allowed to have contact with Y: how are you going to manage this? This study demonstrates that the Egan model equips students to enable service-users to take more control in the goal-setting process by determining their own strategies. Such goals are then more likely to be adhered to by service-users. Using Egan's approach also meets the PCF (The College of Social Work, 2012) requirements for practitioners to be able to build compassionate relationships and the DCSF (2010) recommendations that students need to be able to use challenge together with empathy. Using the skills specified above instead of resorting to 'do this or else' was also found to reduce conflict with difficult to reach service-users.

This is a small scale study which demonstrates that for this group, the model and its skills were embedded and remembered because all the participants were confidently using most or part of the Egan model in their practice two years after learning it on their course. While particular stages and steps of the model could not always be named, there was an accurate recall of their function. Fears participants had that they might put their own words into the mouths of service-users when using empathic responses were proved to be unfounded when it became clear that empathy helped service-users to feel better understood.

Another finding was that skills of active listening, empathic responding, goal setting and strategies had been absorbed into the students' ways of working. For most of the participants this was a conscious process and as such, they were able to continually reflect on their engagement with service-users. Therefore, a further finding is that using the model enables students to be more effective reflective practitioners. All of the participants were able to talk knowledgeably about the model by offering specific examples of how they had used it in their practice. Given that Trevithick et al. (2004) found very few studies of how theory underpinned the teaching of communication skills or of how successfully this learning transferred to practice, these findings demonstrate that the Egan model can be learned, remembered and used successfully in practice.

In the first study (Riggall, 2011) students gave feedback about how Egan provided them with a 'map' to follow. In the current study, participants further emphasised that referring back to the 'structure' of the Egan model helped them to move forward with service-users when they were struggling. Having this practical model in their minds appears to give students confidence and trust in a way of engaging which they know works and can be relied on again in future sessions and with new service-users.

A further finding was the crucial part that role-play practice played during participants' learning of the model and this echoes the results of Koprowska's (2003) and Dixon's (2013) studies i.e. that practising skills in a safe environment with observers offering constructive feedback embeds and reinforces students' skills and helps them to develop confidence in using the approach in real life situations.

There are limitations to the study. This is a small scale project with participants numbering only seven in total although all of these seven students were also involved in the 2011 study. Six participants were female and one male and all were white, British. Therefore, the sample of participants was not inclusive. This was also an exceptionally able group and it would be useful to find out whether the results would be replicated with a larger and more average cohort. Another limitation is that the evidence emanated from the students' self-reporting on their own use of skills. None of the students were observed or recorded actually using their skills in practice and there is no corroborating evidence from colleagues, supervisors or service-users. Any follow-up studies will need to address these issues. A further study involving larger numbers of students is planned to find out whether the results from the current study can be relied upon.

It is to be noted that similar, positive comments about the Egan model were made to both interviewers, reducing any bias towards pleasing the author (who taught the model initially).

Simpson et al. (2010) in their research on student views on good practice in social work education found that students especially value the teaching of theories which can be related to practice. They recommend reviewing all social work modules and incorporating into them skills development. Learning the Egan model offers students both relevant theory and a framework for developing practical skills.

Disclosure statement

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